The New Criterion

November 1987

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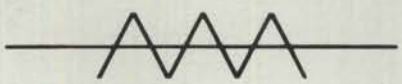

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Charles Edward Eaton's *New and Selected Poems* was published in May by Cornwall Books.

Eric Gibson reviewed Ann Beattie's *Alex Katz* for the October issue of *The New Criterion.*

Edward Hirsch's second book of poems, *Wild Gratitude,* won the National Book Critics' Circle Award.

Roger Kimball wrote "The Academy Debates the Canon" for our September issue.

Eric Pankey's first book of poems, *For the New Year,* was published in 1984 by Atheneum.

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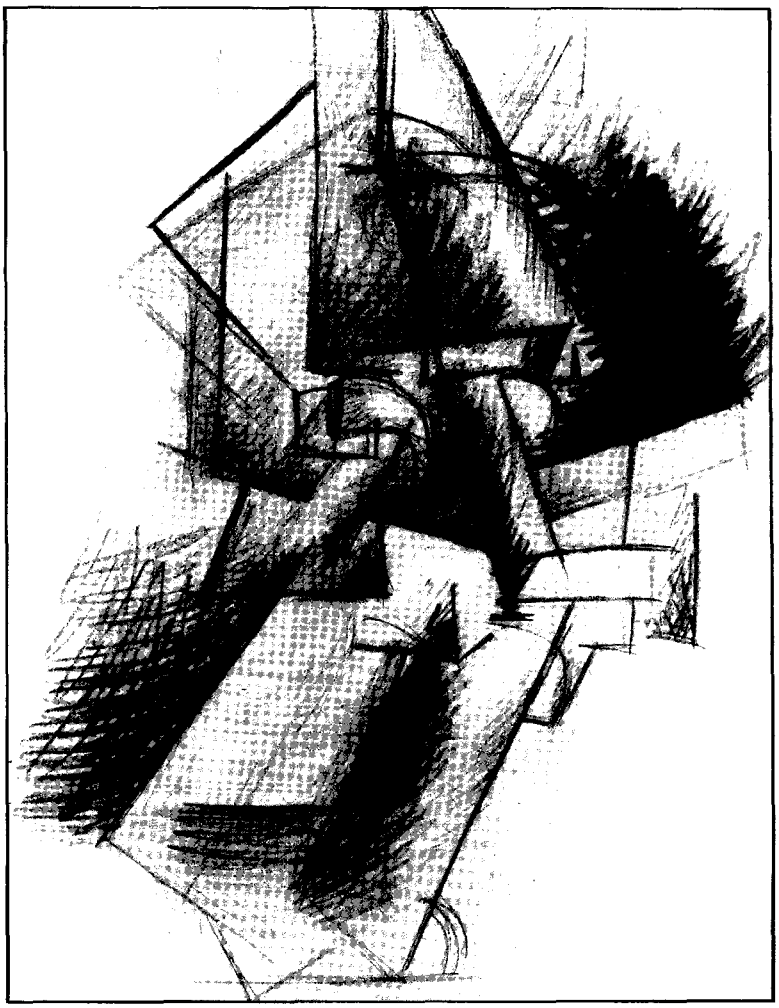

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"Morality Tales" on tour

by Hilton Kramer

From time to time an exhibition comes along that so vividly encapsulates the bad taste, the bogus ideas, and the purblind vulgarity that have been such pervasive characteristics of the art world of the Eighties that the show becomes, in effect, a kind of Baedeker to contemporary cultural horrors—to horrors, that is, that are offered to us under official sponsorship in the name of art. Admittedly, we are nowadays treated to so many shows of this kind that serious opinion will inevitably differ as to which of them may rightfully be considered the worst. My own vote, pending further investigation, goes at the moment to a grisly little spectacle called "Morality Tales: History Painting in the 1980s," which opened the season at New York University's Grey Art Gallery and Study Center in New York and which has now begun its dispiriting, two-year tour of no less than eight North American museums.[1]

As befits an exhibition so completely tethered to the fashions of the moment, "Morality Tales" is a collaborative effort. The initial idea is said to have come from an organization called Independent Curators Incorporated, which is circulating the show, but for the actual curator of the exhibition the ICI bypassed the ranks of its "independent" members and turned instead to Thomas W. Sokolowski, the director of the Grey Art Gallery, who also wrote the text for the accompanying catalogue.[2] In both the exhibition and the catalogue, we are told, what Mr. Sokolowski has undertaken to explore is "the complex relationship between contemporary art, its historical roots, and the political context within which it is created and lives."

Exactly what is meant by this prompt reference to "the political context" is quickly made clear to us in the frontispiece of the catalogue. This consists of a photographically reproduced clipping from *The New York Times* of May 10, 1987, reporting the news of Gary Hart's withdrawal from the 1988 Presidential campaign because of the scandal caused by the Donna Rice affair. Thus, we are put on notice straightaway that sex and politics, as well as sex-in-politics, will figure prominently among the motifs to be explored in this survey of "History Painting in the 1980s." And lest we should still harbor any doubts about the journalistic orientation of the exhibition, Mr. Sokolowski

1 "Morality Tales: History Painting in the 1980s" was shown at the Grey Art Gallery in New York from September 14 to October 24. It reopens this month at the Laguna (California) Art Museum (November 14-December 27), and then travels to museums in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, Hartford, Connecticut, Coral Gables, Florida, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Durham, North Carolina, Lincoln, Nebraska, and Québec, Canada.

2 *Morality Tales: History Painting in the 1980s.* Essay by Thomas W. Sokolowski. Published by Independent Curators Incorporated (40 pages, $15).

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directs our attention in the very first paragraph of his text not only to Mr. Hart's political debacle but to a variety of other current news events: "the trial of subway-vigilante Bernhard Goetz, the fundamentalist ministry scandals of Jim and Tammy Bakker, the Congressional Iran-contra hearings, and the continuing tragedy in South Africa." Since we cannot doubt that Mr. Sokolowski is a concerned observer of current events, sensitive to every nuance of public morality, we must assume that both the Bork hearings and Senator Biden's departure from the Presidential campaign occurred too late for inclusion in his list.

About the events Mr. Sokolowski did manage to include in his list—and by the way, we are still on the first paragraph of his text—he feels that there are only two possible responses. "In such a climate," he writes, "the viewer is able to respond in one of two ways: by becoming inured and accordingly 'tuning out' or by taking a more active [he really means *activist*] approach, responding with tense moral indignation and acting upon it." Presumably, then, he believes that the artists he has selected for inclusion in "Morality Tales" have taken the latter course, and are thus to be judged, above all, by the quality of their moral indignation. Presumably, too, we are being invited to judge *him,* as an activist curator, by the quality of *his* moral indignation in assembling the present exhibition.

It will be noted that in Mr. Sokolowski's initial list of current events calling for our intense moral indignation, no mention is made of the AIDS crisis. This is a subject he has reserved for special attention in his second paragraph, and it prompts him to make some fairly categorical assertions about contemporary art and the narrow choice of attitudes that he believes we are now obliged to adopt toward the making of art as the result of the AIDS crisis. If I read Mr. Sokolowski correctly, he is insisting that on this subject, too, only two responses are possible. Either the AIDS crisis will inspire our artists to produce an art that, as he writes, "provide[s] both indictment and solace to social ills and moral dilemmas," or else it will produce what he describes as "over-intellectualized *Schadenfreude* (malicious pleasure)." (I hasten to point out that when Mr. Sokolowski speaks of "indictment," he is not inviting any censure of AIDS victims; on the contrary, he is (I gather—his syntax isn't always flawless) condemning what he regards as an insufficient effort to deal with the crisis.) "One would expect the latter response [that is, what he terms "malicious pleasure"] to produce an art form that trades in dispassion and irony," he writes, "and the former to result in the resurgence of history painting."

History painting—or at least what it pleases Mr. Sokolowski to describe as history painting—is thus deemed to be not only an appropriate artistic response to the AIDS crisis, the Gary Hart debacle, and sundry other events on the political calendar, but the *only* appropriate artistic response to such matters. "The groups of artists included in the exhibition," he writes, "have attempted, by distilling various elements from both past and present sources, to make an emotionally accessible and morally responsible art." Which is to say that these particular artists have passed Mr. Sokolowski's moral-indignation test with high marks, while certain other artists—discreetly unnamed—have not.

Before we turn our attention to what Mr. Sokolowski has actually given us in the name of "emotionally accessible and morally responsible art," it is worth pausing, I think, to reflect on the cast of mind that is revealed to us in these extraordinary observations. Haven't we heard something like these strictures before—and often—in this century? When Mr. Sokolowski speaks of "an art form that trades in dispassion and irony," what is he actually referring to? These—as he very well knows—are code words denoting and denigrating certain aspects of the modernist aesthetic, which, if Mr. Sokolowski's distinctions have any meaning at all, he can only regard as fostering an emotionally *in*accessible and morally *ir*responsible art.

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It would be interesting to know exactly which of our modernist artists Mr. Sokolowski believes to be guilty of this charge. Ellsworth Kelly? Jasper Johns? Frank Stella? If it is such a heinous betrayal of their vocation for artists to trade "in dispassion and irony," shouldn't the culprits be identified and appropriate measures taken to insure their isolation? The implications of Mr. Sokolowski's strictures are truly appalling, for they bring us fearfully close to the point at which modernism is denounced as either "degenerate," the kind of moral pollution that Hitler inveighed against, or as "bourgeois formalism," the doctrine used by Stalin and his successors to liquidate the Russian avant-garde.

Ideas of this sort are not entirely unknown to our own history, either. They were powerfully invoked in the Thirties in the politically inspired attempt to elevate Social Realist art at the expense of abstraction and other modes of modernism. The imperative then used to keep artists in line wasn't the AIDS crisis, of course; it was "anti-fascism" and the victory of the proletariat. But the impulse was unmistakably similar: a demagogic impulse designed to intimidate and discredit all forms of artistic expression that fail to meet the perceived political needs of the moment. It may be that Mr. Sokolowski improvised his theory of a "morally responsible art" in a moment of panic. The AIDS crisis has induced that kind of panic in better minds than his—and with good reason. But it is, all the same, a detestable and menacing theory, and it is a particularly repulsive one coming from the official of a major university in the art capital of the nation. At the very least, Mr. Sokolowski owes an apology to all those artists whose work—and whose motives!—he has derogated so categorically.

It is only when we come to take a look at the paintings that Mr. Sokolowski has assembled in the "Morality Tales" exhibition that we can fully understand his need to buttress his defense of this lugubrious assortment of failed pictures with some sort of extra-aesthetic argument. For as a painting exhibition, the show is a shambles--a farrago of *pompier* pretension, academic illustration, and political kitsch that at its worst (in the contributions of Ida Applebroog and Attila Richard Lukacs) barely meets the standard for a beginning art student, and at its best (in the painting of Odd Nerdrum) bears only the most obscure relation to the ostensible theme of the exhibition. There are, to be sure, a couple of well-known names represented here: Leon Golub, with one of his familiar political pictures; and Eric Fischl, with one of his familiar adolescent-sex pictures. Both artists are immensely successful at the moment, and will for that reason alone lend a certain cachet to this event for those who have eyes for reputations rather than for paintings. But both in my opinion are the kind of artists upon whom we shall look back, a generation hence, with a sense of embarrassment and disbelief that they could ever have been taken so seriously.

Add to his unlovely roster the names of Sue Cole, Vincent Desiderio, Pamela Golden, Gregoire Müller, Andy Patton, Mark Tansey, Joanne Tod, and Jerome Witkin, and you will have the full complement of talents that, in Mr. Sokolowski's judgment, represents the best that history painting can offer us at the present time. Should it come as any surprise that most of the works on view are not really examples of history painting as that term is generally understood? There is a lot of sex depicted in these paintings, and some politics, and a fair ration of violence of various kinds—but history? There are contrived fictions and imaginary anecdotes, replete with quotations and "appropriations" from the painting of the past, but there is virtually nothing in this exhibition of "History Painting in the 1980s" that qualifies as the painting of history.

It must be said for Mr. Sokolowski that he is well aware of this situation, and does his best not so much to explain the apparent contradiction—apparent even to him—as to explain it away. After insisting that history painting is not dead, he tells us that it has been transformed into something else, hav-

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ing passed into its current phase of what he calls "personalization."

> While some would argue [he writes] that this personalization runs counter to the very nature of traditional history painting, it will be seen that this de-institutionalizing of the genre was, and is, its very salvation. The transition from a period when image-makers served a homogenous collective that shared common beliefs and proscriptions to one in which diverse moral and ethical codes became the norm, forced a re-thinking of grand-manner painting. Thus, the history painter became the painter of morality tales as he exchanged fable for truth and, in so doing, brought history painting into the present tense. It is this legacy that leads directly to the history painting of the present moment.

In other words, paintings that now celebrate private fantasy, mainly sexual in nature, are to be construed as a revitalized form of history painting. If you can believe that, then I suppose it is also possible to believe just about anything: even, perhaps, that the bulk of the paintings in this exhibition are worth showing. To believe that, however, you would have to be interested in something other than painting, and in painting not at all.

In the last paragraph of Mr. Sokolowski's text for the catalogue of "Morality Tales," he returns again to the subject of the AIDS crisis, which, the Gary Hart frontispiece notwithstanding, appears to have been the spur to organizing this exhibition. If that is the case, the question must be posed: Does Mr. Sokolowski really believe that either this exhibition or his highly dubious assertions about art and life in the catalogue text contribute *anything* to either an alleviation or a solution of that crisis? Can bad painting or ill-reasoned art writing affect this catastrophe in even the smallest degree? I think not. But they can contribute something poisonous to the cultural atmosphere, especially when accompanied by the kind of demagogic appeal that Mr. Sokolowski has made the basis of this exhibition. That, alas, is the real significance of "Morality Tales."

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Doing new music, doing American music

by Samuel Lipman

Anyone who fancies himself a thinker, I suppose, should have the experience of mixing his ideas with his labor; particularly is this true in the case of American musical intellectuals, beset as they are by the difficulties of bringing the strengths and weaknesses of the New World to the already existing corpus of European masterpieces. In all the different ways I have worked in music, I have been conscious of the peculiar problems associated with being an American musician. This was true when I was solely a performer. It remained true when, in early middle life, I became a critic. Now, in my fifties, when I am also what is so nicely called an artistic administrator, I find my awareness of this problem taking up a good deal of my thought.

As a musician I have played the piano. As a critic I have judged the compositions and performances of others. As an administrator I have been deciding what music should be played and who should do the playing. My administrative work has come in my role as the Artistic Director of the Waterloo Festival and School of Music in New Jersey. Here, for six weeks of activity each summer, I have chosen artists and repertory for twelve programs, six of them orchestral (in the beautifully restored Waterloo Village) and six featuring chamber music (this past summer at Princeton University). As a general rule, choice of artists is limited by commercial availability and, it goes without saying, by taste. Choice of repertory is, in one sense, limited only by the musical riches of the past and the present; in quite another, it is hemmed in by a tradition—and a present practice—of taking into account the most highly rationalized, though ultimately doomed, considerations of institutional survival and personal self-interest. The consequences of the ways in which repertory is chosen are of particular significance for new music—and for American music, a body of composition much of which is dear to my heart and vital, I believe, to the future of our composers, our performers, and our audience.

My musical knowledge and tastes have been formed by my experiences not just in listening to music, but in playing it, first as a student, and then as a professional. My piano-playing life began largely in the way of all such child-prodigy endeavors. From almost my first lessons I studied the old masters of the old country, beginning with Bach, progressing through Haydn and Mozart, quickly going on to the shorter pieces of Chopin—with due allowances being made for the smallness of my hands—and finally arriving in my early and middle teens at Beethoven and Liszt.

But my training was not completely confined, as so many students' is even to this day, to the music of composers alive a century and more before I was born. My first San Francisco piano teacher, realizing the need for new music, did assign me works by

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such then-contemporary composers as Bartók, Kabalevsky, Prokofiev, Shostakovich, and Villa-Lobos. I found the newer works given to me—all of them, of course, relatively easy—both piquant in sound and great fun to play.

By the time I went on to my second teacher in the late 1940s, I was no longer simply the prisoner of what went on in my piano lessons. Now 78 RPM records of famous pianists began to play a large part in the formation of my pianistic agenda. In the world of modern music, my first phonographic catch was Vladimir Horowitz's 1945 discs of the Prokofiev Sonata no. 7 in B-flat major, opus 83 (1942). Here was new music—by turns biting, passionately lyrical, and motoric—to stir my young blood. It was pianistically dazzling in Horowitz's performance, for me still one of the great examples of recorded piano-playing. I felt I had to learn the sonata, and I had to play it in concert. Though getting it in my fingers cost me much effort, I was successful with it, even with such a severe critic as the conductor Pierre Monteux (with whom I was then working each summer).

This success emboldened me—though I still was very much a product of "classical" Russian piano teaching, and my theoretical studies with the French composer Darius Milhaud were doing curiously little to interest me in the European music then being written—to look for another contemporary virtuoso work. The work I found was, surprisingly enough, American: the 1949 Sonata of Pennsylvania-born Samuel Barber, which I first heard in the extraordinary 1950 Horowitz recording. I fell in love with it and learned it immediately, though it presented even greater technical and musical (especially rhythmic) challenges than the Prokofiev had. Soon after, I played in concert a brilliant and clangorous new sonata by the Stanford University composer Leonard Ratner, and two works of chamber music by Aaron Copland: the *Vitebsk* trio (1929) and the (almost) twelve-tone Piano Quartet (1950). I loved the challenges of all this knotty music; even more I felt comfortable with the characteristic sound of it, which seemed in its jazzy toughness and hard-edged sentiment to be pure America—my America.

Then, at the end of the 1950s, I came east to Juilliard and began studying with another Russian piano teacher, this time the redoubtable Rosina Lhévinne. Here, in this *echt* turn-of-the-century Moscow atmosphere, anything more dissonantal than the Prokofiev and Barber sonatas was frowned on. As I found when I attempted to play even these sonatas—and later, the Bartók Third Concerto (1945) and the Prokofiev Third Concerto (1921)—Mme. Lhévinne's only pedagogic interest in such music lay in rounding off its hard rhythmic and harmonic contours. And when I played the Ratner Sonata through for her, she was chilly and dismissive indeed.

All in all, I had little contact with new music at Juilliard, and what little I did have I owed to a class in 1959-60 with the composer Hugo Weisgall. Because of him I heard a private performance by the Juilliard Quartet of the hermetic but fascinating Second Quartet (1959) of Elliott Carter a few hours before its first public performance; I also heard a performance in Washington—by the New York City Opera—of Weisgall's striking intellectual and compositional *tour de force,* the opera (based on Pirandello's modernist classic) *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1956). I regret to say that my only personal contact with American music while I was at Juilliard, other than Hugo Weisgall, was meeting composer William Schuman, then Juilliard's president, after my performance of the Liszt A major Concerto with the school orchestra.

In the early 1960s, I left Juilliard to pursue the chimera of a solo piano career.[1]

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1 In the context of my trying for a solo career, I hope I may be forgiven for quoting from *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*'s admirable and suggestive definition of the word "chimera":

"1. (Gk myth.) Monster with lion's head, goat's body, and serpent's tail.

2. Bogy; thing of hybrid character; fanciful conception . . . ."

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Wonderful as the best-known masterpieces of the past (and the great performances of them) are and will remain, there can be little doubt that the most significant performing careers are made by finding one's own music to play, rather than by recapitulating the successes of one's elders. Though I had little desire to become a modern-music specialist, I welcomed an opportunity, in the summer of 1964, to tour with a wind orchestra, appearing as soloist in works by Igor Stravinsky, Paul Hindemith, and Olivier Messiaen. Neither the Stravinsky work (the Concerto for Piano and Wind Orchestra [1923-24]) nor the Hindemith (the Concert Music for Piano, Brass and Two Harps [1930]) represented a truly contemporary style of composition. By contrast, the Messiaen—his *Oiseaux Exotiques* (1955-6)—was totally up-to-date in its complete reliance for musical material on birdcalls, expressed in a virtuoso manner but with precious little of the pastoral; while this work possessed a certain shocking brilliance, and was of a kind of horrid interest to those who had previously thought of music as a human (or even divine) creation, Messiaen's tone-full but curiously tuneless birds scarcely provided a viable basis for music's future, or even for the compositions of others.

I was certainly aware of the avant-garde musical ferment in America and in Europe. I was aware, too, of what this meant: the replacement of melody and harmony by concepts depending for their interest on words rather than music. This trendy following of the two apparently contradictory but ultimately converging tracks of total serialism and amusical experimentation (the tracks represented by, say, Karlheinz Stockhausen in Europe and John Cage in this country) became all the rage then, and for many years thereafter. It seemed to me that the leadership of musical composition had passed from the composers I had known and played to those whom I could only find to be madmen or bores; I have no reason today to revise my judgment of the period.

Save for Shostakovich, there was little new music coming out of Europe that attracted me at this time. Though all the great names of American music were alive and in all cases, I believe, still composing, "traditional" American modern music had begun the long winter of unpopularity it still (except for a very few pieces of Copland) suffers from today. What was painfully evident on concert programs and record companies' lists was made obvious for everyone to see by the spectacular public and critical failures of the two great American music media events of the 1960s, both of them associated with the grand debuts of Lincoln Center halls: the first performances of Copland's difficult *Connotations* by Leonard Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic at the opening of Philharmonic Hall in 1962, and of Barber's lush *Antony and Cleopatra* by the Metropolitan Opera at the opening of its new house in 1966. Furthermore, what we as a nation had already decided for ourselves seemed to be confirmed by Pierre Boulez's total rejection of American music and composers—save, perhaps, for Elliott Carter—upon his assumption of the post of music director of the Philharmonic in 1971.

So there was little choice for me but to look for the new music amongst the old. In 1965 I read somewhere that the Prokofiev Fourth Concerto, written in 1931 for the one-armed pianist Paul Wittgenstein but neither published nor performed during the Stalin-Zhdanov years of terror and murder, was available in the Soviet Union in a two-piano score. By a circuitous route I obtained the music, and even an engagement to play the concerto the next year (its second New York performance, for it had been played in the early 1960s by Rudolf Serkin with the Philadelphia Orchestra) in Carnegie Hall with John Barnett and the National Orchestral Association, a training orchestra then important in New York and American musical life. Though the performance was well received, and though I soon thereafter played the work's first performances in Boston and San Francisco (with Arthur Fiedler) and in Washington (with Richard Bales), its restriction to just the pianist's left hand had

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the effect of concentrating audience attention on the pianistic tricks (tricks, I should add, of enduring interest only to other pianists) at the expense of the music's considerable, though subtle and even understated, beauty.

In a curious, though rather different, way, the same unwelcome and artistically profitless diversion of attention from music to performer—a diversion highly characteristic of twentieth-century musical life in general—affected the outcome of my next foray into neglected repertory. Sergei Rachmaninoff's Thirteen Preludes, opus 32, were published in 1910, and belong to the period of the composer's Third Piano Concerto (1909). Demonstrating the effect of the various developments associated with Alexander Scriabin and even later with the young Prokofiev, they mark a considerable advance in musical thinking and pianistic writing over such earlier and more immediately attractive works as the Second Piano Concerto (1900-1), the Ten Preludes opus 23 (1901-3), and the Second Symphony (1906-7). I played these pieces a great deal during the early 1970s. But for all their undoubted beauty, the complexity of their harmonic and digital impasto guaranteed that only pianists would find them of major interest.

At this point I should add for the record that the solo recitals I was playing at this time were under auspices—Community Concerts, Inc., a subsidiary of Columbia Artists Management, Inc., my then managers—particularly hostile to twentieth-century music. In 1973-74, my last season of fairly regular touring for them, it was only with extreme, and perhaps unwisely expended, effort that I managed to get them to accept my programming of the ten-minute (and charmingly traditional) Sonata no. 2 (1936) by Paul Hindemith.

For many years, I had been looking for an American work to play with orchestra. Through my friend and colleague Jacob Lateiner, I had become aware in 1965 of Elliott Carter's Piano Concerto, a work which Lateiner had commissioned through the Ford Foundation for his own performance. This immensely difficult work (for performers and listeners alike), which Lateiner was to record live at the work's first performances with the Boston Symphony Orchestra under Erich Leinsdorf[2] and subsequently to play extensively here and in Europe, was by the early 1970s no longer included in his repertory. As I heard him talk about it, and as I listened to his heroic recording, the work began to fascinate me, not just in its transcendent pianistic complexity but also in its communicative possibilities. With the help of associates and friends I arranged to play it, in the summer of 1973 in Aspen (where I was a member of the Aspen Music Festival faculty), and then in 1975 in New York.

What happened to me in the course of arranging, preparing, and playing these two concerts, the first concert greatly inspiring and the second troubling in the extreme, does not just sum up my own experiences in playing new music. I also believe that these experiences accurately describe the general experience of other soloists who are sympathetically inclined to new music but who at the same time do not wish to live in the artificially maintained ghetto of modern-music performance.

Since my Aspen performance of the concerto was scheduled to take place the following August, I began the Carter concerto in November of 1972. From the outset I realized that despite the clear notation of the music and of the composer's intentions regarding its performance, my task was close to insuperable. The number of notes the pianist had to play more or less at the same time, the intricate rhythmic patterns often composed of different meters and tempos occurring simultaneously, the numerous tempo changes based only on subtly

2 Lateiner's recording of the Carter concerto was available some years ago on RCA LSC 3001, and is now deleted; a new recording, by Ursula Oppens with the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra under Michael Gielen, is available on New World NW 347.

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calculated rather than obviously perceptible relationships, and the whirlwind speeds at which everything had to be played, all of these combined with the almost total absence of exact repetition of even the shortest passages to render an exact replication of what Carter had written impossible, at least by me.

I persevered for the necessary nine-month gestation period. While on tour giving recitals—often nightly—of music by Beethoven, Chopin, and Liszt, I painstakingly learned the Carter at the average rate of one page of the two-piano score per day. It was easiest for me to get solid work done when I was lucky enough to find an empty practice studio in a hospitable college music department. Piano stores, those jolly refuges of touring pianists, were rather less accommodating (at least during business hours), for the salesmen felt, not without reason, that the music I was working on did not show their instruments off at their best. Most problematic to work in, of course, were homes, especially when their living rooms and their pianos were the property of lovers of the kind of music I was playing in my recitals. Once I even remember effecting a rather miraculous cure while practicing in such a home. After a few minutes of working on the Carter, the husband of the house came in and apologetically told me I had to leave, for his wife was confined to bed in the next room by the after-effects of a serious stroke. In something close to despair, I asked him whether I might practice another five minutes; out of pity he agreed. I began to play some Chopin, and well before the five minutes were up his wife appeared at the door, pale but decidedly ambulatory, to tell me that I might stay as long as I wished.

As the Carter was getting learned, I realized that I must practice it with a second piano substituting for the orchestra. My wife, the pianist and teacher Jeaneane Dowis, asked Jacqueline Schmitt, one of her best students, to learn this complex and compacted piano version of the orchestral part. When we tried to put the two parts together, it immediately became clear that the density and the split-second simultaneities meant that a run-through even for two pianos could not be accomplished without a conductor. So I taught my wife how to beat time in the best conductorial fashion, a task which, with her secure rhythm and remarkable muscular coordination, she learned quickly and solidly. Now the piece really began to take shape, and I realized, to my intense excitement, that underneath all the complexity—just how far underneath I did not at this time yet realize—a work of high emotional power lay dormant.

My excitement, along with the kind of nervous trepidation that must accompany such risky life-tasks as being shot off into space, carried over into my preparations in June and July in Aspen. I received a rude jolt when I was informed, just ten days before the performance was to take place, that the conductor assigned to me, the Brazilian modern-music specialist Eleazar Carvalho, had canceled his appearance due to a sudden medical emergency which would keep him in his native country. What happened then has been well described elsewhere;[3] suffice it to say here that I was given as a conductor the then twenty-five-year-old trumpet virtuoso Gerard Schwarz, whose great qualification for the task was a close acquaintance with Carter's music and that of other difficult contemporary composers. From the outset Schwarz took to the Carter concerto like a champion duck to water; the concert was his orchestral conducting debut, and from that tense summer Sunday afternoon in the Aspen Music Festival tent, he has gone on to a brilliant international career.

The concert itself was marvelously successful, and at least on this occasion the concerto emerged as possessing a kind of Coplandesque American rawness and grandeur. It seemed to me highly likely that, armed with the stunning recording of the performance, I would be able to perform the piece widely. Despite my best efforts—which included the pressing of an LP record

3 See "The Rise of a Young Conductor" by Heidi Waleson in *The New York Times Magazine,* February 23, 1986.

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from the concert tape, and the sending of the resulting disc to orchestras large and small—nothing happened. Not only was I too unknown, but the work seemed to impress all the professional listeners I sent it to as incomprehensible, or at best unperformable, at least within the constraints of the abilities of less-than-major orchestras.

As matters turned out, I did secure one more engagement with the Carter. Through the good offices of friends in the cooperative management hierarchy of the American Symphony Orchestra, I was engaged to play the piece in Carnegie Hall with the orchestra in the winter of 1975. Sadly, Schwarz was not allowed by various factions in the orchestra (whose first trumpet he had been just before going on to be co-principal trumpet of the Philharmonic) to conduct. The conductor chosen to do the concert turned out to possess limited English, and to be at once rigid and inclined to passivity in rehearsals. Orchestral discipline, too, seemed poor, and when during the concert a mishap in the first movement—unnoticed, I think, by anyone in the audience except my wife, Schwarz, and Carter—threatened to bring the performance to a screeching halt, I finally became aware that, whoever else might be able to carry the Carter concerto to triumph, I was not so able. When the composer called me in Aspen (I think it was in 1976) to fill in, on three weeks' notice, for someone playing the piece in London at a Prom concert, I begged off on the grounds of a schedule conflict. I have never regretted my decision.

I was helped to this far from pleasant frame of mind by something that had happened to me two or so weeks before the Carnegie Hall performance. As part of the usual process of selecting a piano which I would feel comfortable playing on the stage, I had tried, and found wanting for my special purposes, several instruments in the Steinway concert basement on Fifty-seventh Street across from Carnegie Hall. My friend David W. Rubin, then the manager of the Steinway concert department, suggested that I try the Carnegie Hall house piano, which he thought I might find suitable. The hall being free at that moment, we went over, and when I went up on the stage to the piano, Rubin asked me whether he could look at a copy of the score as I played. I replied that I only had the copy from which I played, and that I did not know the work by memory. He immediately assured me that after all my work on the piece I did indeed know it by memory. I offered to try, and I gave him the score. I then played the concerto from beginning to end without the notes in front of me, the only time in my study of the piece I even tried to do so. I have to say that the fact I was able to perform this feat even once—without the orchestra, it is true—impressed me as a sign that I knew the work reasonably well. Imagine my chagrin, then, when almost immediately after this incident in Carnegie Hall I was listening to a tape of it I had just made in my living room and realized that I was unable, as I sat listening to the playback, to find my place immediately in the score.

I must make clear that the point of this story is not that, if I had difficulty finding my place in the score, then no other pianist playing the piece and listening to his own playback would be able to do so either. I am perfectly willing to admit—for I think the odds are overwhelmingly high—that there are others in the world with greater facility and clarity in playing such music, greater familiarity with the idiom, and better hearing with which to disentangle the conflicting elements which make up the work. But then the question becomes, how many such people are there? Surely there are enough to play the piece many times and in many places, but are there enough people with the needed gifts as listeners to make up a willing audience now or at any conceivable time in the future?

I am afraid that there is little real chance ever of the existence of such an audience. I think that here, though perhaps not in the way the author meant the phrase, we find the true significance of the title Pierre Boulez chose from a picture by Paul Klee for his 1955 article on the possibilities

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and pitfalls of electronic music: "At the ends of fruitful land . . ."[4] In his article Boulez suggested that new compositional techniques, applied to both instrumental and electronic media, would bring us to the very edge of musical possibilities. For me, the Piano Concerto of Elliott Carter, in its level of complexity and dissonance, in its rapidity of movement and change, in the demands it makes on both performers and audience, securely occupies the line separating viable from non-viable music. In my own life, I am afraid I have chosen to stay on the near side of this line, even when that has meant giving up the hope of greatness I once entertained for Carter's music. Others, doubtless, perhaps more adventuresome by nature, will put the line of arability on the other side of Carter. I have no doubt at all that whatever the fate of Carter's mature works may be, composition cannot go further in the direction he has adumbrated and remain what can be recognized as music.

My playing of the Carter put paid to one period in my life. Soon I began to write, and within a year I had become the regular music critic for *Commentary*. My first article in that magazine was a highly negative review of a musico-political tract by the English avant-garde composer (and Maoist) Cornelius Cardew, a book which castigated Stockhausen (among other musicians) for being elitist lackeys of imperialism. Then, after an article on Richard Wagner, I found the theme which was to resonate increasingly, not just in my writing, but in my musical thoughts. This theme was the golden age of American musical composition, the period when modernism and a musical audience seemed to come together in the music of Aaron Copland and his coevals. My article on Copland, which appeared in *Commentary* and in my 1979 collection of essays, *Music After Modernism*, was called "Copland as American Composer." It perhaps should have been called: "Where are you now, Aaron, when we need you?"

I made my total rejection of the post-Second World War avant-garde of Stockhausen & Co. clear in a 1979 *Commentary* article (also in *Music After Modernism*) titled "Yesterday's New Music." I followed it almost immediately with a sequel (reprinted in my 1984 collection, *The House of Music*) called "From Avant-Garde to Pop." In this article I rejected the static, pop-tending minimalism of Terry Riley, Steve Reich, and Philip Glass. This concentration on the negative aspects of modern music was welcomed, I suppose, by the many sophisticated music lovers whose love can go no further forward in time than the assassination of the Archduke Francis Ferdinand at Sarajevo.

For myself, I had no desire to confine my own musical life to works and styles I knew and indeed treasured. I craved something in music which the great masters of the European tradition, great as they were, could hardly supply. What I craved was the sound of our own time and our own place, a time and place evoked accurately and affectingly not by the self-indulgent chaos and nihilism so successfully conveyed by the various musical avant-gardes, but rather by the composers for whom music and art were affirmations of life and of peoples—and even, in principle, of the divine.

Perhaps a word is in order here about this idea of art, to which I have felt increasingly drawn for many years. It is not easy for someone with a moderate knowledge of political and social movements of the past century to employ, in an aesthetic context, a phrase like "affirmations of life and of peoples." Despite the fact that much, if not indeed most, great art has been created in the process of making just such affirmations, despite the fact that great art is for countless millions a manifestation of the blessings, rather than the afflictions, of human existence, and despite the fact that the beauty of

4 Originally published in Herbert Eimert and Karlheinz Stockhausen's new music journal *Die Reihe*, no. 1 (1955; English translation, 1958). It was later collected, under the slightly different title "To the farthest reach of the fertile country," in Boulez's *Notes of an Apprenticeship*, New York, 1968 (original French edition, 1966).

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art provides both artists and audience with a glimpse into the real beauty of the world, there can be no doubt that the idea of art as life-enhancing is now sadly compromised. When such an idea does not merely seem fatuous, it seems to smack of Stalinist socialist realism, of the demand, enforced by murder, that art present a happy face to the world and inspire happy thoughts in its captive audience. Art, we are told everywhere, must be autonomous, rootless, and fundamentally irresponsible—even at the cost of being trivial and ugly—if it is to be valued as art at all.

But it seems to me now that art—and most of all music—can little afford the unwillingness of its supporters to make high claims on its behalf. As churchgoers of yesterday well knew, the devil must not be permitted to have all the good tunes. The idea of art as a beneficent force in the life of the individual and of society was not the only constructive idea appropriated—and perverted—by Stalin and his henchmen: these monsters also latched onto peace, economic development, literacy, and scientific knowledge. In Stalinist hands, all these thoroughly praiseworthy goals were used as mere pretexts for enslavement. In a free society, in the hands of free individuals, these goals, in art as well as in politics, economics, and science, when worked toward and achieved, can and do make life better.

I began increasingly to view the history of American music as a battle between those who would carry on music and those who would destroy it. On one side I found what might be called the traditional modernists, whose music had (in varying degrees) strong historical roots in European art music and the American musical past. On the other side I found the avant-gardists—the droll but subtly hostile Cage, the total serialists who felt that music composition could be planned and analyzed with the precision of scientific experiments, and the electronicists who managed to combine in their writing every amusical device made possible by developments in technology. This battle seemed to me to be taking place between those who saw music as speaking to the reality of its listeners' lives and those who saw what they chose to call music as mocking the very idea of such a reality.

In 1981, in a paper delivered at a 92nd Street YM-YWHA conference in New York on contemporary music, I tried to sketch my vision of a viable American modernist musical tradition.[5] I took eleven composers born within a decade of 1900—Douglas Moore, Walter Piston, Virgil Thomson, Howard Hanson, Roger Sessions, Henry Cowell, Roy Harris, Carter, Barber, and Schuman, and, of course, Copland himself—who together seemed to me to represent a vastly better time than the present in American composition. Including such divergent tendencies as the cerebralism of Sessions, the Nordic romanticism of Hanson, the naïve but touching experimentalism of Cowell, and the equally naïve but touching traditionalism of Thomson, the grouping was hardly unified; indeed, Copland himself did not mention four of these composers—Moore, Cowell, Barber, and Schuman—in the first edition of his pathbreaking book, *Our New Music* (1941).

But whatever the aesthetic differences between all these gifted composers, they shared a central position in American musical life, and in contemporary music writing as a natural outgrowth of that life. For all of them, new composition was a part of the shared experience of the community, not an activity spawned in the ivory towers of laboratory and academy. It is the dissimilarity of their creative expressions that distinguished these composers' individual musical personalities; their similarity lay in the seriousness of their attempt, often expressed in a sound of rough rhythms and raw melodic shapes, to create an American music at once natural-sounding and new.

In the early 1980s, I continued to play the piano, though less frequently. In 1980, for example, I played the William Schuman Piano Concerto (1938/1942) in Aspen. Just

5 This paper was published in *Commentary* as "American Music: The Years of Hope," March, 1981.

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what problems American music still faced were spookily dramatized for me by the behavior of a disturbed music student who blocked my way backstage just before I was to go out to play. He told me that my secret was out: the piece to be played on the concert was not the concerto of William Schuman but rather that of Robert Schumann, and that as a special favor the student would be willing to play what was (in his estimation) that better piece in my place. More important, however, was that as always the rehearsal time for a beautiful American piece had been skimped, and that the European conductor had brought to the preparation and performance of the work every musical virtue save those of familiarity with the score and ease with the jazz rhythms in which the score abounds.

Two years later, in 1983, I played (in Baltimore, New York, Aspen, and at the Waterloo Festival in New Jersey) the Weisgall Piano Sonata, a piece that the composer had just written for me. This large-scaled, highly chromatic, and often touchingly lyrical work, like so much other marvelous American music, is still in search of performers with successful careers, performers who will treat the music with the care and passion it deserves. It must be said that this ignoring by performers of distinguished music does not only affect American music. When my wife and I played, again in Aspen, two important albeit difficult works of Darius Milhaud—the Concerto for Two Pianos and Orchestra (1950) and the Concerto No. 2 for Two Pianos and Percussion (1961)—it was all too clear that despite the composer's years in the 1950s and 1960s of devoted service to the Aspen Festival his music, once he was no longer alive to oversee its performance, was not treated seriously.

In 1982, I was appointed by President Reagan to the National Council on the Arts, the advisory board of the National Endowment for the Arts, for a six-year term. I found there much concern about aiding American music. Unfortunately, that concern expressed itself either in a kind of shotgun approach to funding (as if throwing money at artistic problems could in itself remedy them) or in a pronounced bias toward "experimental," "cutting-edge" programs. The readiness to support every kind of proposal that came the Endowment's way reflected—and still reflects—a strong discomfort with the very idea of making choices in new art between what can only be called good and bad. The tilt toward the avant-garde stems from the natural readiness of government bureaucracies in a democratic society to honor the old maxim, "the squeaky wheel gets the grease." While the practitioners of what is called the "next wave" display ideological fervor and rhetorical moxie, mainstream composers are either too busy writing real music or are bewildered at, and enervated by, the grantsmanship of those whom they find it difficult to regard as colleagues.

In 1985, the Waterloo Music Festival and School, of which I had been a faculty member since its founding in 1976, asked me to succeed my friend and co-worker Gerard Schwarz as the head of the organization's artistic administration (with Schwarz becoming principal conductor). I found myself in a position to make concert programs involving vastly more pieces—including works for large orchestra—than I had been able to perform myself in my many years of playing the piano. My thoughts immediately ran to American music—my kind, as it were, of American music. I saw this music as constituting, at Waterloo, the most significant portion of an orchestral and chamber-music repertory emphasizing the best of twentieth-century music and lesser known masterpieces from earlier periods.

I immediately realized this musical conception placed me in dangerous conflict with the three principles that govern present-day programming. The first two of these principles can be simplified into maxims: Be sure to give the audience the pieces they already know, and be doubly sure to give them plenty of celebrity soloists famous for performing, to instant acclaim, the most predictably crowd-pleasing works ever writ-

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ten. The third principle is one of seemly respect toward the new: Enough contemporary music of an attention-getting character must be played to ensure that everyone will see that a proper attention is being paid to the art of today, but not so much as to interfere in any way with the real business of concert-giving, which remains the presentation of famous works and performers.

But the reasons for pursuing a contrary policy are great, and for me, compelling. Because of the problems of new music, and because of a decline in public sophistication, I am convinced that we are faced with a diminishing core audience: an increasing shortage of those people who attend concerts regularly and who have a fund of knowledge on which to form their reactions. Similarly, because of social and economic pressures, our young orchestral musicians, trained in our best schools as artisans rather than artists, have given up the goal of having a wide knowledge of classical music in favor of a single-minded quest for success in the job market. Patrons—those whose responsibility and pleasure it is to provide the material conditions for serious art—are being told by administrators that their task is one which the pleasure-calculating Jeremy Bentham would have applauded: the greatest entertainment for the greatest number. All these difficulties seem of particular importance in this country, where we are faced with the task of preserving an aging and over-familiar European repertory in a rapidly modernizing and increasingly hedonistic American culture.

I resolved to see whether in its small way the Waterloo Music Festival and School—despite the received wisdom which decrees that summer festival programming ought to be frothy and entertaining—could be a proving ground for an attempt to reverse these trends. It seems plain to me that since composition is the primary stuff of music, any attempt to change music must begin with what is being played. Therefore my first concern, one which remains paramount for me today, two years later, is the concert repertory, in particular the missing middle of the repertory, the pieces that lie between what is over-familiar to musicians and music lovers and what is deeply (and I think properly) unacceptable.

Two Waterloo seasons—a total of twenty-four orchestral and chamber music concerts—have now passed. During this short time, and in these few concerts, in our pursuit of the modern and the unfamiliar we played seventeen works, the majority little known, by eleven historically important and representative American composers. These composers have included Barber (Violin Concerto [1939], *Summer Music* [1955], and *Mutations from Bach* [1967]); Ernest Bloch (*America: an Epic Rhapsody* [1926]); Carter (one of Eight Pieces for Four Timpani [1950-66]); Copland (Piano Sextet [1937], *An Outdoor Overture* [1938], and Symphony No. 3 [1944-46]); Ingolf Dahl (Music for Brass Instruments [1944]); George Gershwin (Lullaby for String Quartet [1919] and Concerto in F [1925]); Hanson (*Lament for Beowulf* [1925] and *Elegy* [1956]); Harris (Piano Quintet [1936]); Piston (Symphony No. 4 [1950]); Wallingford Riegger (Concerto for Piano and Wind Quintet [1953]); and Schuman (*New England Triptych* [1956]).

In the twentieth-century repertory outside American music—in addition to comfortable and familiar compositions by such composers as Falla, Ibert, Rachmaninoff, Respighi, and Sibelius—we did works by the English Malcolm Arnold (Brass Quintet [1961]); the Hungarian Bartók (Violin Sonata No. 2 [1922] and the Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion [1937]); the German Boris Blacher (Divertimento for Piano, Trumpet, and Trombone [1948]); the Mexican Carlos Chavez (Soli I for winds and brass [1933]); the English Edward Elgar (the little-known Cello Concerto [1919]); the German Hans Pfitzner (Three Preludes from *Palestrina* [1917]); the French Francis Poulenc (Brass Trio [1922, rev. 1945] and Piano Sextet [1932-39]); the Russian Prokofiev (Double Bass Quintet [1924] and Symphony No. 5 [1944]); and the Russian Shostakovich (String Quartet No. 1 [1935], Violin Con-

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certo No. 1 [1955], and Symphony No. 15 [1971]).

Taken together, the American with the non-American and the unfamiliar with the familiar, the twentieth-century music we did at Waterloo came close to making up half of our programs. Not only did this change from conventional program-making bring about a welcome balance; it supplied a welcome breath of air and a touch of lightness to our concerts. The American music showed itself the equal in importance and beauty of any music written elsewhere at the same time. In this new atmosphere, the many masterpieces of the past we did, and the well-known soloists we occasionally featured, seemed all the more interesting and exciting for not being surrounded by an unchanging diet of the old. And I should add that even when we did perform the old, some of it was out of the ordinary: we opened our season this past summer with the well-known Bach Passacaglia in C minor, not in the usual Stokowski transcription but in the striking and in some ways even shocking reworking by Respighi. Similarly, we began each of six 1987 chamber music concerts with two fugues from Bach's great *Art of Fugue,* each pair performed in different instrumental combinations ranging from strings, winds, and brass, to two pianos, chamber orchestra, and pitched percussion.

It is too soon to say how this venture will have fared in the long run. I have heard ominous noises that the size of the audience was held down by my quixotic concentration on interesting repertory at the expense of crowd-pleasing pieces and soloists. One local critic was heard to remark that the reason unfamiliar music is unfamiliar is that it isn't good; one New York critic found some of our American music uneven at best and dreary at worst. In contrast to the detractors, the most important critic in New Jersey came down firmly on our side, and a major New York critic described our programming as among the most interesting at American summer festivals.

But my own feelings about the enterprise are hardly so balanced. I remember the glorious playing of the infinitely touching Barber Violin Concerto by the great American violinist Dylana Jenson; I remember the brilliant performance of the melodic and colorful Piston Symphony No. 4 by Gerard Schwarz and the orchestra; I remember the tumultuous response to the Bloch *America* by an audience that could not have known of Bloch beforehand, let alone of his *America.* I cherish the extraordinary cooperation and sympathy that I received from faculty musicians who play in the most imporant orchestras in this country and from students who attend the best schools; I cherish their telling me after concerts that the process of discovery upon which we were engaged, in contrast to the routinized playing of routinized programs, was the way the life of music should be lived. Most of all, I was touched by the young cellist who exclaimed: "Oh, Mr. Lipman, this music is so uplifting!" Naïve perhaps, but all the more truthful and inspiring for that.

What about "the cutting edge"? Doesn't everyone have a duty to play what has just been written, to give what has never been heard a chance? Yes, and in fact that duty is now everywhere being fulfilled: more music is being written and almost immediately performed (and just about all of it promptly forgotten) than at any time in the history of Western music. But I think performing musicians have a higher duty to music: to play that which they love in a way that the audience can make its own. It is to find fresh objects for this love that musicians have always worked, and must continue to work today. I have no doubt that the music being written today can include some works that will be capable of satisfying this test, and every thinking musician looks forward to finding them. The stakes are high but simple. They are nothing less than the survival of one of the chief beauties in our lives, and of one of the highest achievements of our civilization.

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The trials of Edgar Allan Poe

by James W. Tuttleton

Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) may be the most misunderstood and the most disliked of serious writers who have made a deep impact on the American public. This is in part the consequence of his sensational and morbid themes—hysteria, catalepsy, metempsychosis, hallucinations, premature burial, the odd impulse, the bizarre fetish, the split personality, the paranoid delusion, insane revenge, and bestial murder. But more important, Poe's general reputation is the unfortunate consequence of persistent errors of fact and interpretation that have twisted the public view of the writer's life and work from the very beginning. Just four years after Poe's death, the Reverend George Gilfillan proclaimed:

> Poets as a tribe have been rather a worthless, wicked set of people; and certainly Edgar A. Poe, instead of being an exception, was probably *the* most worthless and wicked of all his fraternity . . . . He was no more a gentleman than he was a saint. His heart was as rotten as his conduct was infamous . . . . He had absolutely no virtue or good quality, unless you call remorse a virtue, and despair a grace . . . . He was, in short, a combination in almost equal proportions, of the fiend, the brute, and the genius.

Granted that poets—even in the age of the gentle Tennyson—sometimes strayed from the straight and narrow, what could Poe have conceivably done to warrant such accusations?

For one thing, Poe had the bad judgment to select as his literary executor another minister, the Reverend Rufus Wilmot Griswold. Poe naïvely regarded him as a friend, as a sponsor of his work. But the jealous Griswold, a minor literatus, had never gotten over Poe's candid criticism of one of his anthologies, and he harbored a thirst for revenge worthy of Montresor in "The Cask of Amontillado." At Poe's death, he simply assassinated the poet's character, leaving an image of Poe as the archetype of the immoral, self-indulgent, and socially subversive writer. Scarcely was the body cold when Griswold, under the pseudonym "Ludwig," spewed out his calumnies in an obituary published in the New York *Daily Tribune* for October 9, 1849.

> Edgar Allan Poe is dead. He died in Baltimore the day before yesterday. This announcement will startle many, *but few will be grieved by it.* The poet was well known personally or by reputation, in all this country; he had readers in England and in several of the states of Continental Europe; *but he had few or no friends*; and the regrets for his death will be suggested principally by the consideration that in him literary art lost one of its most brilliant, but erratic stars. [Italics in the original]

Turning to "the character of Mr. Poe," Griswold called him an unbalanced misanthrope who "walked the streets in madness or melancholy, with lips moving in indistinct

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curses, or with eyes upturned in passionate prayers." Taking Poe's works as revelations of the writer's own character, Griswold described him as cynical, devoid of faith in man or woman, contemptuous of the social system, shrewd, angry, envious, irascible, coldly repellent, and the dupe of villains:

> There seemed to him no moral susceptibility; and what was more remarkable in a proud nature, little or nothing of the true point of honor. He had, to a morbid excess, that desire to rise which is vulgarly called ambition, but no wish for the esteem or the love of his species; only the hard wish to succeed—not shine, not serve—succeed, that he might have the right to despise a world which galled his self-conceit.

The attitudes here expressed (and reprinted at the time in other American newspapers) were further elaborated in Griswold's "Memoir of the Author," which he had the malice to prefix to his four-volume edition of the writer's works in 1850. With such a sponsor, is it any wonder that for more than a century Poe was roundly condemned by ministers, temperance advocates, high-school teachers, and other guardians of public morality?

What are the facts of Poe's life? Thanks to Dwight Thomas and David K. Jackson, we are now in a position to see the writer's life with a clarity that none of his contemporaries (and only a very few subsequent biographers) have been able to attain. With the publication of *The Poe Log: A Documentary Life of Edgar Allan Poe, 1809-1849,*[1] Thomas and Jackson have now given us—in their fifty-page introduction and 919 pages of text—as complete a written record of Poe's activities, of his family, friends, and acquaintances, of his publications and reception, as we are likely ever to have in one volume. This book is simply a splendid, massive, compendious work of biographical research—into newspapers, magazines, published and unpublished letters and journals, business account books, school and medical records, military communiqués, rent receipts, and the like. If you want to know what it cost Poe's foster father to mend the seven-year-old's linen and to supply his shoestrings at the Misses Dubourg's school in London in 1816, the answer is here: three shillings.

The Poe Log—like Jay Leyda's *Melville Log* and *The Years and Hours of Dickinson,* which it resembles—is not a conventional biography. What we are given here are simply the facts—the facts without interpretation, the facts marshaled in a day-by-day, month-by-month, year-by-year sequence. To read through these entries is to experience a "diary" of the unfolding events of Poe's inner and outer life and the way these events were perceived by his contemporaries. Perhaps the clearest way to suggest what *The Poe Log* contains is to present some typical listings. In December, 1846, at the age of thirty-seven, Poe had fallen dangerously ill in Fordham with what was commonly believed to be a lesion of the brain; his wife Virginia was dying of tuberculosis. With no income from writing, they had been reduced to abject poverty and destitution. News of their plight was published in the New York *Morning Express* on the fifteenth of December. (In the following entries, I have deleted some repetitive material and the documentation.)

> 15 DECEMBER OR LATER. James Watson Webb, editor of the [New York] *Morning Courier,* collects "fifty or sixty dollars" for Poe at the Metropolitan Club. Sylvanus D. Lewis, a Brooklyn lawyer, donates "a similar sum" after reading "the statement of the poet's poverty."

> 16 DECEMBER. *The Evening Mirror* reprints the report of Poe's illness from yesterday's *Morning Express.* Hiram Fuller [the editor and a critic of Poe's satirical sketches of the New York literati] comments: "Mr. Poe is undeni-

1 *The Poe Log: A Documentary Life of Edgar Allan Poe, 1809-1849,* compiled by Dwight Thomas and David K. Jackson; G. K. Hall, 919 pages, $75.

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ably a man of fine talents, and in his peculiar vein has written stories unequalled. We have no doubt but that with a fair field for exertion, he could produce a series of tales in grotesqueness and force equal to those of the German Hoffman [*sic*]. His friends ought not to wait for publishers to start a movement in his behalf, and if they do not, we, whom he has quarreled with, will take the lead."

AFTER 16 DECEMBER. PHILLIPS, MAINE. [George W.] Eveleth receives Poe's 15 December letter, mailed on 16 December. He writes Louis A. Godey [publisher of *Godey's Lady's Book*] in Philadelphia, stating that Poe has told him his reason for discontinuing the "Literati" articles.

18 DECEMBER. BROOKLYN. In the *Daily Eagle* Walt Whitman reports: "It is stated that Mr. Poe, the poet and author, now lies dangerously ill with the brain fever, and that his wife is in the last stages of consumption.—They are said to be 'without money and without friends, actually suffering from disease and destitution in New York.'"

19? DECEMBER. NEW YORK. Mrs. Hewitt writes Mrs. Osgood in Philadelphia: "The Poe's [sic] are in the same state of physical & pecuniary suffering—indeed worse than they were last summer, for now the cold weather is added to their accumulation of ills . . . .

BEFORE 23? DECEMBER. LOWELL, MASSACHUSETTS. Mrs. Jane Ermina Locke . . . sends Nathaniel P. Willis her poem "An Invocation for Suffering Genius," inspired by press reports of Poe's illness . . . .

23 DECEMBER. NEW YORK. The *Home Journal* for 26 December contains Willis' editorial . . . [proposing] that there should be an institution to assist educated and refined persons who become disabled or impoverished . . . .

23 DECEMBER. Willis writes Poe at Fordham, enclosing his editorial, the anonymous letter mentioned in it, and apparently Mrs. Locke's poem . . . .

26 DECEMBER. BOSTON. The *Bostonian,* a weekly paper, comments: "Great God! is it possible, that the literary people of the Union, will let poor Poe perish by starvation and lean faced beggary in New York? . . .

30 DECEMBER. FORDHAM. Poe writes Nathaniel P. Willis: "The paragraph which has been put in circulation respecting my wife's illness, my own, my poverty etc., is now lying before me; together with the beautiful lines of Mrs. Locke and those by Mrs. _____, to which the paragraph has given rise, as well as your kind and manly comments in 'THE HOME JOURNAL.'" Since the private affairs of Poe's family have been "thus pitilessly thrust before the public," he must make a statement clarifying "what is true and what erroneous in the report alluded to." It is true that his wife is hopelessly ill and that he himself has been "long and dangerously ill." Because of his illness Poe has been in want of money, but he has never suffered from privation beyond his powers of endurance. The statement that he is "without friends" is a complete falsehood: "Even in the city of New York I could have no difficulty in naming a hundred persons, to each of whom—when the hour for speaking had arrived—I could and would have applied for aid." Poe is now recovering his health: "The truth is, I have a great deal to do; and I have made up my mind not to die till it is done."

To read such entries, listed day by day, is to get to know Poe partly from the inside, partly from the outside; to apprehend the unfolding of his experience as it occurs, without much in the way of biographical flashback or foreshadowing; to move forward with him without knowing where he is heading; but, at the same time, to register the anxieties felt when the fortunes of an acquaintance begin to fluctuate. The effect of such reading is a salutary antidote to lives where the biographer structures meaning in advance—for example, according to Piaget's theories of childhood development or Freud's Oedipal complex or Marx's notions of class antagonism.

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At the same time it is to become aware that Poe indeed had many friends, that he had a Southerner's point of honor and sense of chivalry, that if he had ambition it was a passion to create enduring masterworks of literature and to elevate the aesthetic taste of his country and time, and that his death was deeply mourned by those who knew him well. Poe, it is true, was often destitute and suffered the humiliation of begging or borrowing money. Sometimes he lied, drank to excess, and became surly. There is no doubt that his hard-hitting reviews alienated powerful people and that he had many enemies.[2] But he was by no means the moral monster his enemies made him out to be. Henceforth there ought to be a special circle in Dante's hell reserved for every high-school English teacher who neglects to read this book and goes on presenting Poe's work as if the author were one of his own demented personae, leering in the visage of Vincent Price.

The difficulties of Poe's life were at times overwhelming. His parents, well-known thespians along the Eastern seaboard, died when he was two years old. Taken in by the successful Virginia merchant John Allan, Poe grew up in comparative ease in Richmond and in England. In all respects he seems to have had a normal youth. He had many friends, was an excellent student, and had the gifts of a superior athlete in swimming, running, and boxing. But in his adolescence, the intransigence of his literary aspirations estranged him from his practical foster father, they quarreled continually, and when young Poe ran up gambling debts at the University of Virginia in 1826 he was temporarily cut off. Obliged to subsist by his own wits, he joined the army in 1827, served a hitch, was honorably discharged, and thereafter won an appointment to West Point. But the youth who had already published two books of poetry by the age of twenty was dissatisfied with the life of a penniless cadet and contrived to get himself dismissed. When John Allan died in 1834, Poe was omitted entirely from the will.

After the grinding vicissitudes of an irregular life, Poe's luck took an upward turn when he joined the impoverished family of his aunt Maria Clemm, a household that included her daughter Virginia, her mother, and her nephew Henry Poe, the poet's brother. With that modicum of domestic stability, Poe began in the early 1830s to sell his short stories in Baltimore; he won some literary prizes; and he came to the attention of a local reading public. This success led to an editorial appointment on *The Southern Literary Messenger,* which gave him a ready outlet for his poetry, fiction, and criticism. In his creative and editorial capacity, Poe almost single-handedly made that journal the most important literary magazine of its time. By May of 1836 he felt financially secure enough to marry his cousin Virginia, a beautiful young girl not quite fourteen at the time. Thereafter, between 1838 and 1844, he performed editorial work for *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine* and *Graham's Magazine* in Philadelphia, and then removed with his family to New York, where he wrote for Willis's *Evening Mirror* and other periodicals.

In many respects these were the happiest years of Poe's life. He was deeply and tenderly in love with his young bride; Virginia's mother gave "Eddy" a maternal sympathy and love he had never known in childhood; his book reviews established him as the best literary critic in America; and his short stories ("Ligeia," "The Fall of the House of Usher," "William Wilson," "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," "The Masque of the Red Death," "The Pit and the Pendulum") and exotic poems ("The Raven," "Tamerlane," "Al Aaraaf," "To Helen," "Lenore," "Israfel") established him as perhaps the most brilliant and absorbing man of letters in America. Everyone, it seemed, knew Poe's work.

Furthermore, his critical observations—

2 A selection of Poe's criticism can be found in *Essays and Reviews,* one of the two volumes of Poe's works that were published by the Library of America in 1984. The other volume is entitled *Poetry and Tales.*

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scattered throughout his essays, reviews, and letters—established him as one of the foremost romantic literary theorists of his time. His emphasis on pleasure rather than on truth in art, on the indefinite image rather than on the discursive statement, on the necessity of music and sound rather than on sense—all of these *obiter dicta,* however unoriginal, dazzled his contemporaries and helped to lay the groundwork for Aestheticism, Surrealism, and *Symbolisme* in the *fin de siècle.* In emphasizing mood and feeling, especially melancholy and pathos, he touched the nerve of his century. Yet even in our own era of polemical feminism, it is not difficult for many people to regard "the death of the beautiful young woman" as that artistic subject "which most induces the pleasurable excitement of melancholy." Thus readers still seek in him the affective states that Poe cited as the end of art. Nor can there be any doubt that the preoccupation today with the lyric form owes much to his theory that true poetry inheres in a pleasurable excitement of the soul, or the intensity of an emotional affect, that can only be achieved in a brief lyric. He thought a rhymed poem not an hour in length was about all the excitement one could take in a single sitting. And his formalist insistence on a preconceived unity of effect in art became one of the foundations of the New Criticism as practiced by Ransom, Tate, Brooks, and Warren. Poe's was essentially a jerry-built aesthetic, manufactured from limited and not always fully understood reading; but in the era of Longfellow's pious moralizing and Emerson's didactic meter-making arguments in verse, it had the impact in America of a revelation of genius.

The Poe Log offers many evidences of the high celebrity to which Poe attained in these years. In December of 1835, James Kirke Paulding told White of *The Southern Literary Messenger* that "your publication is decidedly superior to any Periodical in the United States, and Mr. Poe is decidedly the best of all our going writers. I don't know but I might add all our Old Ones, with one or two exceptions." In 1839 the Saint Louis *Commercial Bulletin* commented on Poe's editorship of *Burton's*: "there are few writers in this country—take Neal, Irving, & Willis away and we would say *none*—who can compete successfully, in many respects, with Poe. With an acuteness of observation, a vigorous and effective style, and an independence that defies control, he unites a fervid fancy and a most beautiful enthusiasm. His is a high destiny." Few would have disagreed with Park Benjamin, who in 1842 remarked in the New York *New World*: "EDGAR A. POE—We regard this gentleman as one of the best writers of the English language now living." Furthermore, Poe's editorial duties at these journals and his residence in Richmond, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York had brought him into contact with the major writers of his time—Albert Gallatin, Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, Fitz-Greene Halleck, William Cullen Bryant, Charles King, Lewis Gaylord Clark, James Russell Lowell, and George Lippard. It is true that he made many enemies in New England, for he dared to criticize the fuzzy-minded Transcendentalists and to accuse Longfellow of plagiarism. Nearly everywhere else, however, at the peak of his career, he was held in the highest regard.

But Poe's too frequent job-hopping was symptomatic of deep troubles, both personal and professional. At each of these magazines he was only an employee, and although at times he virtually controlled the literary department and dramatically improved the circulation, he was often at odds with the publisher about what the magazine ought to contain. And he never earned enough. Although he issued a continuous stream of reviews, articles, stories, and poems throughout the period, Poe was poorly paid and could not decently support his family. The absence of a satisfactory international copyright law made his works easily pirated and reprinted at no profit to him. Thus his fame increased, but not his store. Even with his editorial jobs, he was obliged to write for up to six hours a day, much of the time about trivial and transient

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authors. He also handled correspondence and oversaw proofreading, printing, and production. These chores bored him, and he sometimes sought refuge in drink. At times he failed to proofread an issue or to supply sufficient copy and alienated his bosses; and he could be nasty and egotistical when he drank. He wanted and needed a journal of his own, and for a period of years sought backers for a new magazine of literature and criticism. But the economic conditions in the 1840s were not propitious.

We must add to Poe's professional problems the tragedies of his personal life. His wife and mother-in-law, whom he loved with a tenderness and devotion truly remarkable, were constantly in want. Mrs. Clemm did what she could as his messenger, delivering manuscripts and review copies and receiving payments. But there was never enough money. Virginia was afflicted with tuberculosis in 1842 and, during the next five years, her hemorrhages were recurrent and progressive, culminating in her death in 1847. The emotional ordeal of watching her die drove Poe to fits of profound depression. George R. Graham, the publisher, later remarked:

> I shall never forget how solicitous of the happiness of his wife and mother-in-law he was, whilst one of the editors of Graham's Magazine—his whole efforts seemed to be to procure the comfort and welfare of his home. Except for their happiness—and the natural ambition of having a magazine of his own—I never heard him deplore the want of wealth. The truth is, he cared little for money, and knew less of its value, for he seemed to have no personal expenses. What he received from me in regular monthly instalments, went directly into the hands of his mother-in-law . . . . His love for his wife was a sort of rapturous worship of the spirit of beauty which he felt was fading before his eyes. I have seen him hovering around her when she was ill, with all the fond fear and tender anxiety of a mother for her first-born—her slightest cough causing in him a shudder, a heart-chill that was visible.

Perhaps as a consequence of these pressures, Poe drank—irregularly but to excess. He went through long periods of cold sobriety but could fall off the wagon at any time and be found wandering the streets in a state of delirium. Some of his "sprees" were reported in the press and circulated throughout the country; and, in an era of aggressive Temperance Reform, Poe was condemned as immoral rather than seen as the victim of a disease. After reports of his drinking had been circulating for some time, he tried to defend himself to his friend Joseph Snodgrass.

> It is, however, due to candor that I inform you upon what foundations he [the publisher Burton] has erected his slanders. At no period of my life was I ever what men call intemperate. I never was in the *habit* of intoxication. I never drunk drams, &c. But, for a brief period, while I resided in Richmond, and edited the *Messenger,* I certainly did give way, at long intervals, to the temptation held out on all sides by the spirit of Southern conviviality. My sensitive temperament could not stand an excitement which was an everyday matter to my companions. In short, it sometimes happened that I was completely intoxicated. For some days after each excess I was invariably confined to bed. But it is now quite four years since I have abandoned every kind of alcoholic drink —four years, with the exception of a single deviation, which occurred shortly *after* my leaving Burton, and when I was induced to resort to the occasional use of *cider,* with the hope of relieving a nervous attack.

These remarks smack of the rationalizations of an alcoholic, but it is doubtless true that Poe became intoxicated exceptionally easily. He told his friend George W. Eveleth that when Virginia began to hemorrhage and he despaired for her life, he

> took leave of her forever & underwent all the agonies of her death. She recovered partially and I again hoped. At the end of a year the vessel broke again—I went through precisely the same scene. Again in about a year after-

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> ward. Then again—again—again & even once again at varying intervals. Each time I felt all the agonies of her death—and at each accession of the disorder I loved her more dearly & clung to her life with more desperate pertinacity. But I am constitutionally sensitive—nervous in a very unusual degree. I became insane, with long intervals of horrible sanity. During these fits of absolute unconsciousness I drank, God only knows how often or how much.

It should be said that generally Poe led an abstemious life, "a studious and literary life," as he called it, that was not seen by the public. But, shattered personally and professionally, he did succumb to the temptation to drink. And while travelling through Baltimore in 1849, Poe fell in with some bibulous acquaintances and was discovered on October 3 at Gunners Hall, a local tavern, drunk and incoherent. It was Election Day, ballots were cast in the tavern, and the ward heelers had made sure that drinks were plentiful. Neilson Poe, the poet's cousin, later told Griswold that Poe had "passed, by *a single indulgence,* from a condition of perfect sobriety to one bordering upon the madness usually occasioned only by long continued intoxication . . . ." However that may be, Poe was carried to a Baltimore hospital, where he died on October 7 in a state of *delirium tremens* brought on by the toxic effects of withdrawal. After his interment, J. Alden Weston, a young admirer, remarked:

> The burial ceremony which did not occupy more than three minutes, was so cold-blooded and unchristianlike as to provoke on my part a sense of anger difficult to suppress . . . . In justice to the people of Baltimore I must say that if the funeral had been postponed for a single day, until the death was generally known, a far more imposing escort to the tomb and one more worthy of the many admirers of the poet in the city would have taken place.

Poe's defense of his studious life has considerable merit. A chronic drunkard could not have produced such a large and important literary oeuvre. And it may be true that a single drink triggered these toxic reactions. Was liquor a poison rooted in the family's physiological constitution? Did Poe have a hereditary "predisposition" toward alcoholism? Thomas and Jackson, the compilers of *The Poe Log,* offer no interpretations. But William Poe, the brother of Edgar's grandfather, seemed to think so, for he issued this warning to the poet in 1843: "There is one thing I am anxious to caution you against, & which has been a great enemy to our family, I hope, however in yr case, it may prove unnecessary, 'A too free use of the Bottle.' Too many & especially Literary Characters, have sought to drown their sorrows & disappointments by this means, but in vain, and only, when it has been too late, discovered it to be a deeper source of misery." Another detail in *The Poe Log* suggests a predisposition brought on in childhood. Jane Scott Mackenzie later remembered that when she had visited Poe's dying mother in 1811 she found that "the children [Poe and his sister Rosalie] were thin and pale and very fretful. To quiet them, their old nurse . . . took them upon her lap and fed them liberally with bread soaked in gin, when they soon fell asleep." The nurse confessed to Mrs. Mackenzie that for more than a year she had "freely administered to them gin and other spirituous liquors, with sometimes laudanum, 'to make them strong and healthy,' or to put them to sleep when restless . . . ."

If the moral objections to Poe's character were not enough to sink him, another kind of criticism has subsequently affected the poet's critical reputation. This is the view that Poe's is essentially a juvenile sensibility that appeals to other juveniles. Henry James, in his comments on Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal,* said in 1876 that to take Poe

> with more than a certain degree of seriousness is to lack seriousness oneself. An enthusiasm for Poe is the mark of a decidedly primitive stage of reflection. Baudelaire thought him a profound philosopher, the neglect of whose golden utterances stamped his native land with

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> infamy. Nevertheless, Poe was the much greater charlatan of the two, as well as the greater genius.

T. S. Eliot likewise remarked in "From Poe to Valéry" that "if we examine his work in detail, we seem to find in it nothing but slipshod writing, puerile thinking unsupported by wide reading or profound scholarship, haphazard experiments in various types of writing, chiefly under the pressure of financial need, without perfection in any detail." Eliot thought that Poe's verse and fiction appealed to some primitive domain of the psyche and, although his work stuck, it is not work of the kind to which we return again and again. This is reminiscent of James Russell Lowell's comment in "A Fable for Critics": "There comes Poe, with his raven, like Barnaby Rudge,/ Three-fifths of him genius and two-fifths sheer fudge . . . ."

Eliot was dismayed at the high reputation of Poe in France—particularly in the criticism of Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and Valéry. For, indeed, it was through this Gallic admiration that Poe's reputation was partly sustained after his death and even revivified in the twentieth century, thanks to deeper interests there in *l'art pour l'art* Aestheticism, Surrealism, oneiric literature, and psychoanalysis. In calling attention to Poe in France, Baudelaire wrote that

> the first time that I opened one of his books I was shocked and delighted to see not only subjects which I had dreamed of, but SENTENCES which I had thought and which he had written twenty years before.

Baudelaire translated a good many of Poe's tales, and, in "Edgar Poe, sa vie et ses oeuvres" (1856), he represented him as *le poète maudit,* the outcast artist in materialist America whose critical ideas in "The Poetic Principle" and "The Philosophy of Composition" constituted a brilliant aesthetic grounded on an opposition to didactic art. Does *The Poe Log* enlarge upon these literary considerations? In fact it does.

Readers of *The Poe Log* may be surprised to learn of the extent of Poe's public lecturing on poetry and criticism in many cities along the Eastern seaboard, occasionally to an audience as large as two thousand. On August 21, 1849 in the Richmond *Semi-Weekly Examiner,* the reviewer John M. Daniel remarked that Poe's lecture exploded

> what he very properly pronounced to be, the poetic "heresy of modern times," to wit: that poetry should have a purpose, an end to accomplish beyond that of ministering to our sense of the beautiful.—We have in these days poets of humanity and poets of universal suffrage, poets whose mission it is to break down corn laws and poets to build up workhouses . . . .

Poe's aestheticism was peculiarly geared to the milieu in which he wrote. For literary taste in American culture had also been corrupted by an excessive nationalism. Emerson had announced in 1836 that we had listened too long to "the Courtly muses of Europe" and ought to have a properly appreciated indigenous American art; and the book reviewers—according to the Washington *National Intelligencer* in the same year—began to give "exorbitant and indiscriminate praise to every American book." The nationalistic spirit was so pernicious that, "no sooner was a novel, poem, or any work of any species, published as the production of an American author, than the periodical press, unanimously, throughout the land, were occupied in singing its praises; and in this manner many a spurious and utterly untenable reputation has been attained."

That book reviewing then was a game of backscratching and puffery is suggested by the career of Griswold himself, who told J. T. Fields, of the Boston publisher Ticknor & Company, that "I puff your books, you know, without any regard to their quality." Although Poe was not guiltless of this vice, especially where the female writers were concerned, he was generally appalled at the state of criticism in his time and the corruption of literary standards. As the *National Intelligencer* put it, Poe

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> boldly took up the cudgels against so pernicious an evil, and succeeded in shaking the throne of popular faith to its centre, by a series of attacks, bold, well-directed and irresistible, against a number of the most popular authors of the day. The system, too, has been followed up ever since with an industry so untiring, an impartiality so unimpeachable, an ability so undeniable, as to have extorted admiration from all sources . . . .

But if at first readers liked Poe's critical objectivity, he developed the reputation of excessive bile, of tomahawking defenseless incompetents, and the effect of his criticism was rather like that of John Simon today. Meanwhile, his poems and stories came to be seen as brilliant but "without any redeeming admonition to the heart." For such critiques, of course, Poe cared little. As he remarked in the Preface to *The Raven and Other Poems* (1845), "With me poetry has been not a purpose, but a passion; and the passions should be held in reverence; they must not—they cannot at will be excited with an eye to the paltry compensations, or the more paltry commendations, of mankind."

Poe's grand indifference to the opinions of mankind suggests that profound dissatisfaction with the conditions of this world voiced in so many of his otherworldly works. *Eureka* in particular elaborates the sources of his strange preoccupation with the paradisal life beyond the grave. This prose poem conveys a crudely carpentered metaphysic in which the Creation itself is claimed to be the fragmentation of an Original Unity to which every particle of being seeks to return. The protagonists of Poe's art are thus projections of this vision; they are men of imagination, exiles from a primal Paradise, voyagers in a strange land—this disease of our material existence. They have their real being in an Ideal World marked by a Unity and Oneness occurring in some primordial far-off antiquity. Thus there is next to no social context in Poe's tales and poems.

Although he lived at a particularly turbulent time in America—while the westering movement was afoot, immigration was constant, urbanization was dawning, abolitionism and slavery were gearing up for the Civil War—Poe was never interested in giving reportorial or journalistic accounts of the sociological features of American life. For Poe, the artistic vision that might capture an intuition of paradise was the only thing that mattered. It was his passionate means of trying to unify the fragmented world of fallen reality, to recover from the primal alienation produced by the Creation itself. He therefore trafficked in the nostalgia of loss, in an ideality known only in dreams, his substitute for the horrifying actuality of the quotidian life. "Israfel," "Ligeia," "The Fall of the House of Usher," *Pym,* "Annabel Lee," and "Lenore" all allegorize a longing for immortality, for this lost world of Ideal Existence before birth. Accompanying this nostalgia is a concomitant fear of death and annihilation, with obsessive brooding about physical and psychological decay—the grim phantasm of fear afflicting the reason and bringing it to the point of madness, a fear reflected in his characters' preoccupation with dreams, trances, hypnosis, catalepsy, and metempsychosis. Above all, he longed for a love that survives death, bodily dissolution, and the grave. Art, whether created or appreciated, was thus his means of transcending the paltry circumstances of the actual and attaining the effect of an intimation of immortality. As he put it in "The Poetic Principle," the faculty of Ideality in us creates a thirst that is

> no mere appreciation of the Beauty before us—but a wild effort to reach the Beauty above. Inspired by an ecstatic prescience of the glories beyond the grave, we struggle by multiform combinations among the things and thoughts of Time to attain a portion of that Loveliness whose very elements perhaps appertain to Eternity alone. And thus when by Poetry—or when by Music, the most entrancing of the Poetic moods—we find ourselves melted into tears—we weep them—not as the Abbate Gravina supposes—through excess of pleasure, but through a certain petulant, impatient

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> sorrow at our inability to grasp *now,* wholly, here on earth, at once and for ever, those divine and rapturous joys, of which *through* the poem, or *through* the music, we attain to but brief and indeterminate glimpses.

Thus through art we are meant to get a vision of that Supernal Beauty, existent before the fall into birth, that is our eventual destiny.

Poe's relation to these materials is poorly understood, for his speculative cosmology is the incoherent thought of an overworked autodidact. Readers with an interest in ideas in literature have tried to find in this anti-humanist world view a coherent philosophic statement, but without success. Poe's grandly elaborated impatience with this valley of unrest seems to appeal most to Freudian critics, for the single perceiving self—the subject of the great works—is a self in quest of its own annihilation. To read *The Poe Log,* however, is to have Poe's wild flights grounded in the actualities of his life, to see the romantic rhapsode in the context of the hurried polemical journalism of his own times, to meet the husband and son-in-law "Eddy" behind the self-created myth of the tortured romantic artist. Here he is a much more human figure than appears in any other biography. And we owe to Thomas and Jackson a profound debt for making available the raw materials on which better interpretive biographies and more penetrating criticism will henceforth be written.

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Pollock and company

by Jed Perl

There may be very little left to find out about the Abstract Expressionists, and yet some force keeps attracting writers to the old personalities and disputes, and it's not just publish-or-perish. Each author sets off into the New York of the Forties and Fifties, passes by the same galleries (Julien Levy, Peggy Guggenheim, Betty Parsons), the same critics (Robert Coates, Clement Greenberg, Harold Rosenberg), the same artists (Gorky, de Kooning, Pollock). One writer distinguishes himself from the other by taking up a formalist or an anti-formalist line, by focusing on biographical facts or political events. Still, they all follow much the same path, and they all more or less end up with what Irving Sandler called, in the irresistible lingo of bestsellerdom, *The Triumph of American Painting.* Serge Guilbaut's recent academic bestseller, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art,* may be wildly fantastical in its intermeshing of Cold War and avant-garde, but it also belongs to the literature of triumph, to which it offers a new type of hagiography, whereby the artist becomes a martyr to Pax Americana.

The catalogue of an important exhibition, "Abstract Expressionism: The Critical Developments," which has been mounted at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo this fall,[1] is perhaps most memorable for giving Abstract Expressionism a sprinkling of fashionable French ideas. Whatever one may think about Foucault and structuralist terminology, this modern Continental thought is too elegant and self-consciously clinical to shed much light on the New York avant-garde of the Forties, with its blunt directness in style, discourse, and ideas. In most of the eight essays in the Albright-Knox catalogue, theory is a dressing that smothers the raw ingredients of history. The terms in Richard Shiff's essay, "Performing an Appearance: On the Surface of Abstract Expressionism," may be "indexical" and "iconicity," but they ultimately seem to refer to old reliables, such as abstract and representational. Why, in this case, all the bother? No doubt to convince us that the old dish of Abstract Expressionism has the allure of a newer nouvelle cuisine. At least Ann Gibson's essay, "The Rhetoric of Abstract Expressionism," has a surprise ending, where the reader who persists will meet this stunner: "One could, then, with hindsight, define the late procedures of certain Abstract Expressionists as postmodern." But perhaps this is only to heap Pollock and Newman with further praise, postmodern being a current euphemism for important, significant. And why not postmodern? Serge

1 "Abstract Expressionism: The Critical Developments" is on view at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo through November 29. The show was organized by Michael Auping, chief curator at Albright-Knox. A catalogue with the same name, also organized by Michael Auping, has been published by Abrams in association with the Albright-Knox Gallery (304 pages, $49.50).

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Guilbaut had already concluded his book by referring to Pollock as the granddaddy of the students who closed down the University at Nanterre in 1968 and scrawled on a wall the message, "The porridge you forced down my throat as a kid: I've come with it all over your wall." The wide world is by now abject in its veneration of anything that America has produced since the Forties. The French themselves go for American art with the same mindless enthusiasm that they go for McDonald's Golden Arches.

The whole subject of Abstract Expressionism seems to wither beneath the mercilessness of the attention, or maybe all of this is a form of inattention. Surely there's too much busyness about the writing of essays, the gathering of bits of data. No one would dare doubt that Gorky, de Kooning, Pollock, Newman, and a few others are the foundation upon which the glorious edifice of American art has been built. Perhaps, unconsciously, there's a sense among those who labor in the field that one shouldn't look too carefully at the works themselves. After all, if Abstract Expressionism turned out to be not quite all that has been claimed—if Pollock isn't the heir to Picasso—then the whole edifice of Pop, Minimalism, Conceptual Art, and Neo-Expressionism might begin to tumble down. We need Abstract Expressionism—it's our birthright, the key to our legitimacy.

Certainly Deborah Solomon, in her new biography of Jackson Pollock, takes as a given the centrality of her subject to the history of twentieth-century art.[2] Solomon opens with Pollock exclaiming in 1946, a year after the end of World War II, "Everyone is going or gone to Paris. With the old shit (that you can't paint in America). Have an idea they will all be back." This is supposed to set an upbeat mood; but Solomon's book isn't in the triumphal mode. She appears from her writing to be a perfectly nice and reasonable person, and I found myself wondering why she'd undertaken the biography of someone who was an alcoholic and given to self-destructive love affairs. Solomon doesn't seem to care all that much about Pollock's art. There's no energy to this book—no positive point of view. Whether this is because Solomon was trained as a journalist rather than as an art historian and can't quite grasp the art scene, or because she's temperamentally opposed to writing uplifting prose, or because she has doubts about Pollock's importance, I don't know. This biography has so little imaginative dimension that a couple of days after I'd finished reading it I couldn't exactly remember if I'd made it to the end. Solomon may have thought it was a good idea to take a singularly unromantic view of Pollock, and at first a reader will appreciate her clean-lined approach. But it rapidly becomes clear that Pollock's life makes no sense at all if it isn't given some romantic spin. If Solomon's point is to demythologize Pollock, then an article would have done. Solomon kills him with reasonableness—the guy is driven straight into the ground.

The fascination of Jeffrey Potter's *To A Violent Grave,* the oral biography which came out in 1985 and from which Solomon has borrowed quite a few anecdotes, is in hearing the voices of the actual participants in Pollock's life as they talk on like a Greek chorus intoning the holy name—Jack, Jackson, Pollock, round and round. Potter's tape-recorded conversations don't exactly add up to a book, but they do give us the mood of the period—or at least of the period as seen through the retrospective gaze of those who were there. As the monologues proceed, you begin to imagine the ashtrays filling up with cigarette butts and the thick voices each stopping for a minute as one after the other of the survivors gets up to fix another drink. They're a circle of old-timers—adoring, envious, disgruntled, nostalgic, embittered—all weaving their stories around the golden boy from California. Solomon and other biographers reproduce a photograph taken when Pollock was sixteen,

2 *Jackson Pollock: A Biography,* by Deborah Solomon; Simon & Schuster, 287 pages, $19.95.

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two years before he came to New York, in which he looks like a beautiful innocent angel. It's never quite clear if Pollock's story is about what he did to New York—or about what New York did to him.

The problem with Pollock as a subject for biography is that as a person he isn't especially interesting. The idea of his being a genius is something you submit to or reject. Elizabeth Frank, in a short monograph published in 1983, accused an earlier biographer, B. H. Friedman, of sentimentality. But reading Friedman's *Jackson Pollock: Energy Made Visible* beside Solomon's new book I rather felt the advantage was with Friedman, who'd packed his book with all the activity of the art world—controversies, gossip, interlocking friendships. Solomon, writing a popular biography, doesn't expect her readers to be terribly interested in the ins and outs of the art world—she may be right—and yet without the big supporting cast Pollock's story loses its modern urban pulse. He begins to sound like the hero of a very old-fashioned novel: a boy from the boonies with a gift and a tragic flaw who comes to the city, makes it, and is then destroyed.

Solomon describes the early scenes of Pollock's life at some length. The stalwart, artistic mother who gave birth to Pollock, her fifth and final son, in Cody, Wyoming in 1912; the wayward, drunken father who was often away somewhere trying to earn a living; the parents' various attempts at setting up farms and other businesses in the scrappy, half-built towns of Southern California—all of this is mostly interesting as a case study in the awful poverty of rural America in the early part of the century, and how it broke families and ground down lives, and how people also managed to pull through. The Pollock family actually held together amazingly well. Mrs. Pollock was still around at the end of the Forties and eager to praise her youngest son's drip paintings. There were regular family reunions, which Jackson seems to have hated and drunk his way through. Many attempts have been made to portray Pollock's Western youth as the rich soil out of which his genius arose, but his later interest in Indian sand paintings and symbols probably has more to do with what some French Surrealists were talking about in the Thirties and Forties than with anything a child saw along the way. After Pollock's arrival in New York in 1930 at the age of eighteen he seems to have mostly wanted to dissociate himself from his past. He's one of those artistic Americans for whom being born in the Midwest or the West is a kind of accident of fate and New York always remains the promised land.

Pollock spent most of the Thirties as a disciple of Thomas Hart Benton, whose reputation was based on the wholesale rejection of modern art. In Benton's art and thought Pollock found a pop mythology that could romanticize the American hinterlands he'd known all too well firsthand. Perhaps even more important, in Benton's Greenwich Village apartment and Martha's Vineyard summer place Pollock—who learned how to make spaghetti sauce from Benton's wife Rita, babysat for their six-year-old son T. P., and took part in folk-music evenings—found the ideal American family he'd never had. In later years this phase of Pollock's career was looked upon by all as an aberration of history, to be treated gently. Authors will find in Benton's looping baroque compositions some prediction of Pollock's drips; while the Bentons, though ideologically opposed to abstract art, made an exception for Pollock, and long after he'd gone his own way and gone to his grave spoke to the interviewers about him as a nice, errant son.

Like many charismatic alcoholics, Pollock conveyed a sense of desperation that elicited from family and friends an active sympathy; people managed practical matters for him and got him back on track when he'd begun to get derailed. Pollock passed from a dependence on the Bentons and Charles and Frank Pollock, the brothers who were living in New York in the Thirties, to a dependence on Lee Krasner, whom he met in 1940 and married five years later. In her ministrations Krasner was assisted, in de-

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grees difficult to determine, by Peggy Guggenheim, Betty Parsons, Clement Greenberg, Tony Smith, and many others. In the Fifties, when this crowd began to weary of shoring him up, Pollock turned to the Cedar Bar, where he could be a Hero. The Greek Chorus, however, had turned into a Mob.

The biographers all make much fuss about how hard things were for Pollock—but what avant-garde artist had it easy in the Forties? Once the ball got rolling in mid-decade, Pollock's situation wasn't half bad. The complaints about lack of sales are only understandable by the absurdly over-inflated expectations that were to come later on. Pollock had dealers who were willing to send him monthly checks; he had a run-down house and some land on Long Island, places to stay in the city—and this is all many would hope for even in the 1980s. As for the bills, those who go into the arts without independent incomes have to expect that they will never be paid on time.

The story ends in tragedy, but not really with any surprise. There was so much craziness in the years leading up to Pollock's death that it would perhaps have been more of a plot twist if things had evened out and Pollock were still around, enjoying the fruits of a ripe old age. In 1956, Lee went to Europe, with divorce on her mind. A few weeks later Pollock, out in his car with two young women, killed himself and one of them, running the car into a tree. In the accounts of Pollock's end one's attention quickly goes from Jackson and the women to Lee in Paris, at Paul Jenkins's apartment, receiving the phone call, and Greenberg, when asked to speak at the funeral, refusing. "The reason I won't talk is because he got this girl killed and I want nothing to do with it." Everyone looked to Pollock, but many felt his great time was past, and perhaps some were glad he was gone. One has the impression, reading the many interviews that Lee Krasner gave in later years, that both she and Pollock, those two hard-headed, self-contained artists, never really had an idea of going through life *together*.

"Much has been written about Pollock's difficulties in the last three years of his life, and more has been spoken." This is from Frank O'Hara's slim 1959 monograph. How much more has been written and spoken since 1959—but, again, to what effect?

The roomful of Pollocks in the "Abstract Expressionism" show currently at the Albright-Knox gallery is perhaps a bit weak in the paintings of the 1948-49 period that everyone calls "classic." Still, this selection of eleven works captures Pollock's unique blend of bluntness and extravagance, and makes a most satisfying circuit of the roughly ten years during which Pollock was an artist his contemporaries believed they had to reckon with. The Albright-Knox show (which is a part of the museum's 125th anniversary celebration) brings us as close as we'll probably ever come to a sense of how it felt to see the Pollocks—and the Gorkys and de Koonings and Hofmanns—as they were coming out of the studios and onto the walls of galleries such as Peggy Guggenheim and Betty Parsons in the Forties and Fifties. Michael Auping, a curator at the Albright-Knox, may have produced a catalogue that's insufferably chi-chi, but the show he's hung in Buffalo is another matter entirely—it's sanity itself. This exhibition actually gains from its having been mounted far away from the pressure points of the contemporary museum world. At the Albright-Knox, which is a great but slow-paced institution, the galleries have a lived-in look and the Abstract Expressionists don't seem to be straining for importance. You can get in touch with the artists' dark-toned, scowling, art-intoxicated mood. The museum, with its extraordinary permanent collection and its great riches in Abstract Expressionism, has the clout to obtain major loans; yet there's no overkill, no pizzazz. The paintings are allowed to stand or fall on merit alone. I continue to believe that the Abstract Expressionists are each and every one of them overrated, but at least at "Abstract Expressionism: The Critical Developments" they don't look impersonal, the way they do at the Museum of

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Modern Art or the National Gallery, or at the new museums in Southern California. It's also a help that the Albright-Knox show ends in 1960; we don't have to watch as Rothko and de Kooning sink into repetition.

At the end of his 1955 essay, "'American-Type' Painting," Clement Greenberg comments that all pictures "stand or fall by their unity as taken in at a single glance." I believe that Greenberg is dead wrong about this. I also believe that no other aesthetic position could support the exalted view of Abstract Expressionism that Greenberg and so many others held and still hold. When you walk into the rooms full of de Koonings and Pollocks the works have a masterpiece look. The surfaces are brilliantly agitated, the paintings hold you with their quirks of paint handling, with their confessional poetry of drips and smears and slashes and stains. I can see why people think these are great paintings. From twenty feet away de Kooning's *Gotham News,* with its reds running unpredictably into whites and blacks, is irresistible; and Pollock's *Convergence,* with its soft skeins of red, yellow, blue, and white, is a gorgeous hallucinogenic blur even from five feet away. Yet after one's initial glance, the Pollocks and de Koonings—and most of the other paintings in this show—just start to collapse. The artists seem to believe that emotion resides in the painting *taken in as a whole.* In the work of Rothko, Newman, and Still the parts are totally neglected; in de Kooning, Gorky, and Pollock the parts are looked upon as having no consequence beyond their relation to the whole. Abstract Expressionist paintings are mysterious, but there's no key, no clue, no way into the labyrinth. The viewer isn't enough engaged in making the whole out of the parts. I can admire a Pollock "at a single glance," but the canvases repel close attention, they don't engage my imagination. If you look at one part of a Pollock, it sluffs you off, it pushes you away. Most Abstract Expressionist paintings offer a generalized experience—an experience that has none of the counterpoint or development we associate with great works of art.

Hans Hofmann is the only Abstract Expressionist who makes it possible for us to enter into the painting, and his *Towering Spaciousness* is the one painting in the Albright-Knox show that challenges a viewer inch by inch. Here the clashes of high-keyed, summery colors and the alternating passages of flat and impasto paint are matters with which the eye can engage, out of which the imagination can make a logic. This is the single painting in Buffalo that I was lost inside, that I felt challenged to find my way through. Hofmann partakes of the same climate of adventure as all important painters do—he draws viewers into a pictorial world. In a sense there's nothing more brashly American than Hofmann's paint handling. But of course, as Harold Rosenberg put it, Hofmann had been in Paris during "those ten overwhelming years in which Fauvism, Cubism, Expressionism, De Stijl, Futurism, had burst into view with barely enough time between to ensure their identification." In general the Abstract Expressionists understood a good deal less about the School of Paris and Tradition than is generally claimed.

The Buffalo show is the first comprehensive survey of Abstract Expressionism to be attempted in over two decades, since the Los Angeles County Museum of Art mounted "The New York School, The First Generation: Paintings of the 1940s and 1950s" in 1965. As such this ought to be the occasion for a wholesale revaluation of the group of artists who first made New York a city to be reckoned with in art capitals around the world. In truth, though, if Michael Auping's catalogue is any indication of the range of currently acceptable ideas, the Abstract Expressionist painters are now receiving the same bloodless, unblinking veneration that Renaissance masters such as Raphael received in the academies of an earlier age. And academics aren't the only ones who are sticking to conventional wisdom. Painters such as Frank Stella (in *Working Space*) and Julian Schnabel (in his new memoir-cum-testament *C.V.J.*) talk on about the Abstract Expressionists, but without close attention,

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as if they were required stops on a tour, like the Arch in St. Louis and Mt. Rushmore on the way out West. In this context dissent seems a little mad—a hostile act—and dissent is, whenever it occurs, invariably muffled, a matter of private grumblings, whispers at the edge of the stage.

Those of us who were disappointed by the de Kooning retrospective at the Whitney in 1983 (many) and by the Rothko retrospective at the Guggenheim in 1978 (not a few) are rarely heard beyond the private back-and-forth of New York's restaurants, living rooms, and telephone wires. And when a dissenting view does go public, it's quickly swallowed up by the general "harumph, harumph" of received opinion. Perhaps we ought to be very interested now in finding ways to give dissent a more prominent, public role. Certainly we ought to find a large place in the art world's imagination for Sanford Schwartz's long, brilliant, and demanding essay, "Clement Greenberg—the Critic and His Artists," which is in the current issue of *The American Scholar*. In the midst of Schwartz's uncoiling appreciation of Greenberg lies a devastating attack on Pollock and the other Abstract Expressionists. Of Pollock he writes: "I believe we would prefer not to 'know' him fully, because we don't want to risk being disappointed by him. I think we want to keep him a pure symbol—a symbol of epic striving and of vulnerability." And of the Abstract Expressionists in general:

> Looking at a couple of Barnett Newmans, say, or Mark Rothkos, we can be awed, but a full show is monotonous. It is all the same thing. The Ab Ex story is, in part, how the American artist was determined to join, by one colossal leap, the ranks of the great Europeans. The American achieved it, but he created a facade of greatness; the Europeans' ideas were rethought and turned into a single "sign" or "look" or way of painting. Rothko, Newman, and the rest shove their power to us all at once; there seems to be little in reserve. Their emotions always vibrate at the highest pitch. If we are not on their wavelength, we feel nothing.

"Nothing" was hanging on many walls at the Albright-Knox. Still and Kline struck me as unredeemable trash; Reinhardt and Newman as wildly overrated. Rothko and Gorky are both crippled by their tastefulness, by the overbearing elegance of their effects. Rothko confuses fuzziness with feeling; and he imagines that you make a cheerful painting by using bright colors, a depressing one by using dark ones. As for Gorky, I believe the early detractors who claimed he added nothing to Picasso and Miró were right. Gorky never got beyond the quasi-still life and the quasi-landscape; nor did he know how to get from the sketch to the finished painting. Either he smeared color over a drawing or he jotted in black line over smears of color.

The Albright-Knox, which has received munificent gifts from Clyfford Still, may be pardoned for giving this black-and-orange-fixated Halloween painter a room of his own. Less understandable is the elevation of the bombastic Kline to equal status with de Kooning, and the demotion of Hofmann to a corner of a back room. For me Hofmann is the emotional center of the movement, but certainly the heart of this show is Pollock, and this jibes with history. As de Kooning said in the movement's most famous remark, "Pollock broke the ice." When Greenberg wrote of Pollock's *Number One* (1948) that "it is as well contained in its canvas as anything by a Quattrocento master," or Frank O'Hara wrote of Pollock's *The Deep* as "a scornful, technical masterpiece, like the *Olympia* of Manet," they may have been overreaching, but they were also being carried aloft by their emotions. (Faked criticism doesn't read so well a generation later.) The passionateness of modern European art spilled over into the studios of New York, and the new American avant-garde had the idea that the revolution could be carried forward *here,* that one could extrapolate from the past into the present and so on.

It must have been extraordinarily exciting to see the work of Gorky and de Kooning and Pollock as it first appeared in the studios and galleries of New York. The Abstract

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Expressionist paintings—with their phlegmatic blacks and whites, their lowering grays and blues—represent the spirit of a city that no longer really exists: a city of workingmen and manufacturers, of row houses and tenements, a place of rough, brash emotions. The New York art scene of the Forties was a small one of artists and critics and dealers caught up in a common sense of the occasion. Cold-water flats and fire escapes, a few galleries of modern art, curious antique shops hidden away in brownstones, Europeans arriving to run bookstores where one could go and browse —where is all this in the modern city of today? And what, one wonders, has been gained, when New York is now a stranger to America—a symbol mostly of the embarrassments of poverty and wealth?

We all know what Clement Greenberg is talking about when he says in 1945 that "all profoundly original art looks ugly at first." The criticism reflects a time of change—of shifts, turns, transformations. "In this day and age," Greenberg writes, "the art of painting increasingly rejects the easel and yearns for the wall." The time is *now*. "At a certain moment," Harold Rosenberg writes, "the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act." This is the critic as reporter—a reporter privileged to witness the landmark events of his age. But for many of us who were children in the Fifties the ugliness and the strangeness of Abstract Expressionism was never to be a part of our experience. The ugliness of which Greenberg spoke was, of course, supposed to give way to the beauty of the masterpieces in the museum. A masterpiece holds its original alien spirit as a kind of secret that you can regain when you stand in front of the painting, when you take it apart and put it back together again with your eyes and your imagination. For the generation that came up in the Thirties and Forties it often seemed that the Abstract Expressionists had achieved that strange new poetry of the masterpiece. I think the early enthusiasts were confusing the strangeness of all masterpieces with something else—with the shock of the new.

And yet the Abstract Expressionists of the Forties and early Fifties, of the years when Pollock was alive, really *earned* the world's admiration. They knew that they and their friends were alive to what was alive in modern culture; they did everything in their power to fulfill themselves through the terms of their art. Their best work is about beginnings—about the first attack on the canvas, the sensuousness of materials, the possibilities that each brushstroke implies. What's missing is conclusions—something beyond the rumpled overlaps, the jostling forms. The painting of the Abstract Expressionists is about the artist's studio as a new frontier. The furrowed masculine power of the work only began to diffuse in the Fifties, when raw energy and simple courage could no longer carry the day. The rest is Fame—a long, dull, dishonest epilogue.

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The passing of an elegist

by Bruce Bawer

If it makes any sense at all, in that impotent and ingrown fraternity known as the American poetry world, to speak of an individual as having "power," then there was arguably no American poet more powerful than Howard Moss, who died on September 16 in New York. As poetry editor of *The New Yorker* since 1950, Moss could single-handedly make a poet's career by printing his work regularly—and indeed he played a major role in establishing the reputations of many important postwar American poets, among them Galway Kinnell, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and Mark Strand.

Unsurprisingly, the obituary that Edwin McDowell wrote for *The New York Times* highlighted Moss the editor. Not until the eighth paragraph (of thirteen) did McDowell mention Moss's own writing, and perfunctorily at that. It was a lamentable lapse—lamentable, for over the years Moss had published more than a dozen volumes of his own work, none of them beneath notice. He was, for one thing, an unusually sensitive literary critic, whose books of prose (the most recent of which was last year's *Minor Monuments*) consisted largely of perceptive and delicately articulated appreciations of such writers as Proust, Chekhov, Mann, and Whitman. But his most distinguished contribution, of course, was as a poet. Moss's poems have been described as mannered, and some of them are, but I prefer to think of them as mannerly—gentle, civilized, quietly thoughtful and clever. Take, for instance, these two stanzas from the early poem "Burning Love Letters":

1
Fire that cancels all that is
Devours paper and pen,
And makes of the heart's histories
A cold hearth warm again.
It could as well consume a branch,
Blank paper or black coal
That now, in ashy avalanche,
Scatters the heart whole.

2
What words led to the end of words?
Coldly, all separate sighs
Shiver in flame, flying upwards,
Merged into burnt lies.
In somersaults of light, words burn
To nothingness, then roll
In dead scrolls, delicate as fern,
Or hiss like a waterfall.

As these stanzas suggest, Moss did not as a rule go in for radical experiment or spectacular effects. (When he did, on one occasion, write a poem that represented a radical departure from his usual manner, he called it "Radical Departures.") He has often been described as a disciple of Auden, but his poems bring other affinities to mind as well (though I don't mean to suggest that they are necessarily of the same stature): they have the urbanity and poise of Merrill, the wistfulness of Jarrell, the cold passion and

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abstract joy of Yeats, the stylistic extravagance of Stevens, the luminousness—and attentiveness—to nature of Elizabeth Bishop; their music has justly been compared to that of such classic lyric poets as Campion and Herrick. Though full of feeling—romantic love is a favorite topic—most of them are essentially impersonal, free of revealing intimate detail; though rich with intelligence, they are marked less by intellectuality (and certainly show no trace of Auden's interest in ideology) than by wit. They are dense with wordplay, with Petrarchan conceits, with formal and rhythmic invention; in one poem after another a difficult and ingenious rhyme scheme is brilliantly executed. Audenesque generalizations—many of them about love and its attendant emotions—proliferate: "Not to be loved is to crave power." "Guilt feeds on the inconsequential." Paradoxes abound: in "Venice," Moss writes that "One cannot tell how really false the real is./One cannot tell how real the really false is." In "The Pruned Tree," he declares that "my wound has been my healing." (The title of one of his poetry collections is also a paradox: *Finding Them Lost.*) Moss also plays frequently on double meanings: "lie to me, lie next to me." He does this, as Richard Howard has observed, "not because he is frivolous or obsessed, as most men who pun all the time seem to be, but because he relies on the wisdom that is innate in language itself to enforce his moment, on the wit of words as they work together or against each other . . . . Moss has found the homophone to be a figure of order, and in his dependence on the experience immanent in our speech, has reached to the bottom of things."

At the bottom of things, for Moss, is the inexorable passage of time. (*Writing Against Time* is the name of his first volume of essays, published in 1969.) To read through his *New Selected Poems* (1985), which draws on all eleven of his previous poetry collections, from *The Wound and the Weather* (1946) to *Rules of Sleep* (1984), is to recognize that he is, above all else, an elegist. This is to say not merely that he composes conventional elegies, with titles like "Elegy for My Father" and "Elegy for My Sister," but that he is always, in his poetry, mourning the passing of something, whether it is a love affair ("Burning Love Letters," "The Falls of Love"), a season ("A Summer Gone," "September Elegy"), or a day. To borrow a phrase from the end of his poem "In the X-Ray Room," Moss perennially dwells upon "[t]he precious weight of everything that goes." In the accomplished (if somewhat callow) youthful poem that begins *New Selected Poems,* he writes, "Relatives and friends,/A coffin is our end"; and images of ashes, setting suns, and falling leaves recur throughout the hundred-odd poems that follow. Again and again Moss draws punning connections between falling leaves and summer's leave-taking; between the words *mourning* and *morning* (the arrival of the latter often signaling an end to the former); between the two related meanings ("autumn" and "descent") of *fall.* The cycles of nature —the successions of sunsets and seasons, the rise and fall of tides—are omnipresent in Moss's poetry, continually associated with the fact of his own mortality: "The last late leaf/Settles on my upturned, aging hand." His second collection of essays bore the (punning) title *Whatever is Moving,* and the constancy of change, of movement, is a preoccupation throughout his oeuvre. Movement is, moreover, a prime characteristic of his poetry: "Moss does not write a static poem," Josephine Jacobson observed in a review of *Buried City* (1975). As Moss puts it in a late poem entitled "Rome: The Night Before" (one of many Moss poems that are notable for, among other things, their sense of place),

> Everything permanent is due for a surprise,
> The stopped stunned by the ever-changing.
> What everybody always took for granted
> Astonishes a second before it disappears,
> Like the dinosaur who left a plate of bones
> And was gone for good. In Rome one feels
> Duration threatened day by day,
> Not knowing which of its great works will last,
> Flesh and marble the same mix of mortar.

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At times, Moss's poems can seem stiflingly lapidary, overly self-conscious. But this is more true of the early poems than of the later poems, many of which are in free verse and might almost be described as colloquial in tone. In any event, as Dana Gioia concluded in a recent essay on Moss for the *Antioch Review,* "If a poet has faults, a superabundance of taste, a weakness for description, and a tendency to overpolish seem rather agreeable ones." Certainly the grace, refinement, and deep humanity of Howard Moss's poetry will continue to draw readers to him when many of the more celebrated poets of our day are forgotten.

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion:*

Henri Cartier-Bresson *by Jed Perl*
"The Last Intellectuals" *by Hilton Kramer*
The fiction of Ruth Prawer Jhabvala *by Bruce Bawer*
James Levine's "Adriadne" *by Samuel Lipman*
Frank Stella at MOMA *by Roger Kimball*
A new biography of Sherwood Anderson *by James W. Tuttleton*
Tom Wolfe's novel *by Joseph Epstein*
Toni Morrison *by Martha Bayles*
New poems *by Charles Tomlinson, Peter Davison & Louis Simpson*

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Poems *by Mary Jo Salter, Edward Hirsch, Charles Edward Eaton & Eric Pankey*

Unfinished painting

Dark son, whose face once shone like this,
oiled from well within the skin
of canvas, and those liquid eyes
the brown of rootbeer underneath
  a crewcut's crown, just washed,

his body's gone unfinished now
more than thirty years—blank tent
of bathrobe like a choirboy's surplice
over the cassock's stroke of color,
  a red pajama collar.

Drawn as if it might reveal
the dotted hills of Rome, a drape
behind him opens on a wall
she'd painted with a roller once.
  Everything made at home—

she made the drapes, she made the boy,
and then, pure joy, remade him in
a pose to bear his mother's hope:
the deep, three-quarter gaze; the tome
  he fingers like a pope.

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Is this the History of Art
he marks her place in, or—wait—
that illustrated Brothers Grimm
she'd given him, and shows she lived
  mostly by the heart?

Hard to sort out . . . She rarely put
the final touch on anything
when he was young. It seems that bringing
the real boy up had taken time
  away from painting him

(no crime); she'd also failed to think
of him—back then her only child—
as truly done, and one child only,
but marvelled as he altered like
  the light she painted by.

. . . Like, too, the image he's retained
of the sun in her that now is set,
her eyes that took him back, and in,
squinting as he squirmed, appraising,
  praising him again,

so that, when sifting through her basement
stacked with a dozen such false starts,
and lifting this one, lighter than
he thought it ought to be, to frame
  and hang in his apartment,

he saw in his flushed face how she'd
recreated there what rose
and fell in hers: the confidence
she forfeited each time she dared
  think of an audience.

Who (she must have asked) *would care?*
He does: that finished head conveys
still to him how, sought in a crowd,
a loved one stands apart—he's taller,
  comes in another shade.

—Mary Jo Salter

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Across the long dark border

My sister and I learned about our first war
From the dimly-lit pages of a novel
That we discovered ourselves in the cellar:
I think its title

Was *Across the Long Dark Border of the War Between the States,* and its cover photograph
Showed the face of a handsome young soldier
Divided in half.

The book was about a wealthy family
That was torn apart by Civil War. Delia
Had left her closest kin in Mississippi
And Alabama,

Richard hailed from western Massachusetts.
Delia's three brothers were all Confederates,
But Dick's twin brother led a large regiment
For General Grant.

The parents separated for three chapters
And then divorced. The kids shuttled back and forth
Between them, little pawns of the raging wars
Between South and North.

That was the summer our parents went to court
To determine our last name. Things were confused:
After our mother remarried she changed it
And our father sued.

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We talked to a sort of king of Civil Court
Who wore a splendid-looking black robe and said
The decision was all ours . . . . But it wasn't—
We couldn't decide.

Our parents sat on two sides of one aisle
Staring ahead. That was our Isle of Fates,
That was our own long dark border, our real
War between the States.

—*Edward Hirsch*

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Out of the past

It's as if I'm in a field thick with mist,
Distant and out of touch with myself, unmoved.
I spend weeks in the same place, unloving, unloved,
Cut off from my past.

We're strangers to ourselves. One afternoon
I heard my mother talking about my name
(The name I was born with, my *given* name),
Edward Rubenstein,

And it seemed so far away from me and removed,
Like a distant cousin from my mother's past.
It belongs to someone who no longer exists,
If he ever did.

Sometimes my childhood is like a vaguely
Familiar country. I recognize the names,
But I don't understand the language, the customs,
Or the currency.

And then one morning I'm restored to myself.
I wake up to the memory of my grandmother's
Rumbling chuckle or high-pitched yowl of laughter,
And the mist burns off.

I'm dancing with my grandfather on the stairs.
We're romping across newly-carpeted floors.
We're rolling in a field of wildflowers
Awash with colors.

—*Edward Hirsch*

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The concert grand

It looks lonely there untouched by any human hand,
A wing grown stolid now that it has been stalled,
Chockablock, as if it made its way from some far Cubist
land.

The poet may get this feeling, having written but not
struck home:
No one to memorize his lines, no vocal chords to quiver—
Just this stillness of a wilderness in which he chose
to roam.

The instrument, magnificent, meant to sing, to sigh, to roar—
It has been used and used and used, but now this desuetude:
No one is sitting in the audience, no one is coming in the
door.

Still, I am here, and run my fingers on the unused keys—
It seems a flight of doves has broken from the brilliant
mouth
As if to bless the fact that I sit down, make music as I
please.

Pax vobiscum. Project! Project! The birds light in the
rows.
The crowds are coming in from here, there, from Cubist land—
How many you can hold in thrall at last God only knows.

The wild, the tender strain, the simple passage, and the one
of guile—
I stand, look into the dark, the strings like pulsing vocal chords:
The poet, a long-lost brother, is coming down the aisle.

—*Charles Edward Eaton*

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If you can

for Clare

In your life you will bruise your heel.
You will be walking some day and step
down hard on a sharp rock.

Whether you cry or curse or just feel
pain shiver up your leg, you will take
your next step with more care.

You waited a long time to be born.
We waited with you, waited for you
in this world of rocks.

Once I believed I was saved, beyond
the trouble my family, my friends
and my own stupid choice

brought me. But saved by whom or for what
I don't know. Simple faith was enough.
If you can, please, believe.

It will not make the rocks any less
hard. It is not like ice which fills cracks
and shatters rocks into dust.

But it makes you feel a tenderness,
like blood cushioning the hurt, a bruise.
It shows us where the pain is.

—Eric Pankey

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Dance

Trisha Brown uptown

by Eva Resnikova

Postmodern dance has come a long way from its makeshift beginnings at the Judson Church in Greenwich Village in the early Sixties. After a detour at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, it has recently installed itself at City Center, erstwhile home to New York City Ballet. So much a part of the mainstream cultural scene has postmodern dance become that this year's fall dance season was opened there in September by the Trisha Brown Company, complete with post-performance black-tie "champagne reception and buffet" at the postmodern Equitable Tower.

It's not so much that audiences have become more catholic in their tastes as that the dance itself has become more accessible. Postmodern dance began as a rebellion against both ballet and the traditional modern dance: hence its cognomen. It rejected such expressive resources of the theatrical dance as music, décor, and virtuosity; indeed, for a time it appeared to be rejecting dance itself. The Eighties have witnessed a resurgence of interest in theatricality among avant-garde choreographers—what Sally Banes, in her new introduction to the reissue of *Terpsichore in Sneakers,* the bible of postmodern dance, calls "the rebirth of content." So opposed are many of these tendencies to the "analytic mode" of the Seventies that Banes suggests the postmodern dance of the Eighties might more accurately be called "post-modern*ist*."

Trisha Brown, an original member of the Judson Dance Theatre, proved a harbinger of this new theatricality in avant-garde dance with her 1979 *Glacial Decoy,* featuring décor and costumes by Robert Rauschenberg. Other of her works have included commissioned musical accompaniment, such as the 1983 *Set and Reset.* Both *Glacial Decoy* and *Set and Reset* were included in Brown's two-program, week-long run at City Center—a fact that in itself introduces another concept previously alien to postmodern dance, namely, repertory. Early postmodern dance concerts often seemed like public experiments, which were abandoned once the choreographer's self-imposed "problem" was "solved." For example, for a time in the late Sixties, Brown was creating works consisting entirely of dancers walking along walls and performing other gravity-defying feats through the aid of harnesses, ropes, and similar gear while trying to maintain the illusion of verticality. This former obsession has now been transformed into fleeting references in some of Brown's more recent works, such as *Set and Reset,* which begins with three men bearing aloft a woman who appears to be walking horizontally on air. In another piece presented at City Center, the 1985 *Lateral Pass,* one of the dancers is strapped into a harness attached to a rope.

Brown even chose to present an entire work from a time in the early Seventies when her primary concern was mathematically determined gesture. In *Group Primary Accumulation* four women lie on their

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backs on an empty stage and, in silence, "accumulate" simple, unemphatic movements of arms, legs, head, and torso in the pattern a, a+b, a+b+c, etc. The usual adjective used to describe the effect of these accumulation pieces is "hypnotic"; and, indeed, the relentlessly regular meter does tend to lull. As one number in a program that offered generally more entertaining fare, this circa-fifteen-minute exercise was relatively harmless. (Earlier versions lasted up to an hour and sometimes included a spoken accompaniment.)

The main event of the City Center season was *Newark* (nothing to do with the Garden State but rather a lame pun on "new work"), here receiving its New York premiere. In it, Brown explores the possibilities of off-balance movement. A dancer will slowly change position until he is about to topple, then will either recover his balance and go on to the next movement, or will allow himself to "fall." Often these slow changes of position are done in relevé, reducing the base of support and thus making the dancer's equilibrium even more precarious. Leaning poses, both supported and unsupported, abound, with the body kept aligned rather than bending at the waist to counterbalance.

Always fluid and eccentric, Brown's movement vocabulary here reaches a new level of intricacy and complexity, both kinetically and rhythmically. The slow changes of position in place followed by a quick recovery or fall create their own internal rhythms, and these do not appear to correspond in any way to the sound score by Peter Zummo (described in the publicity material for the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave Festival, where he will appear with his orchestra in November, as a "minimalist composer and trombonist"), which prominently features what sounds like an electronic test-tone.

The "visual presentation" of *Newark* by the well-known minimalist artist and theoretician Donald Judd consisted of several drops in the primary colors of red, yellow, and blue, plus one of indeterminate rust-magenta. These were lowered and raised throughout the dance, serving both to provide different-colored backgrounds for the gray-unitard-clad dancers and to change the size and shape of the stage space in which they perform. Despite the bright colors, the effect was austere.

A more whimsical setting was provided by Nancy Graves for *Lateral Pass,* with squiggly décor lowered piece by piece from the flies throughout the dance, eventually forming a composition like a painting in three dimensions. Zummo's percussive music here included accordian and marimba, lending it at times an Oriental flavor. Once again, dancing and music seemed merely juxtaposed. Brown's choreography included an amusing pas de deux in which the couple keep bumping into each other, but her own solo danced in front of the lowered house curtain misfired.

The audience returned to its seats following the intermission on opening night to find a microphone placed in front of the curtain. The stage remained empty, however, and for a time it was unclear whether or not this was part of the show. Finally, a rumpled Robert Rauschenberg ambled out from the wings and delivered an abbreviated, obviously extempore curtain speech, giving his imprimatur to the proceedings—a bit of performance art rendered even more amusing by the fact that none of his work was being shown that evening.

The second night, however, included two dances with "visual presentations" by Rauschenberg, both involving projected images. *Glacial Decoy* featured four screens at the back of the stage on which black-and-white photographs, mostly of rural scenes, were displayed, changing in a steady rhythm every few seconds. In *Set and Reset* Rauschenberg's three-dimensional décor consisted of a rectangular box with a four-sided tepee shape on either end on which what appeared to be old black-and-white newsreels were projected, at angles and overlapping. At the beginning of the piece the décor rose, and it remained suspended throughout the rest of the piece. A black scrim at the back of the

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stage allowed us to see the brick wall and trappings of the theater, as did the wings made of the same translucent material, through which we could watch the dancers toweling off and preparing for their entrances.

Glacial Decoy is performed in silence, but *Set and Reset* has a score by Laurie Anderson, entitled "Long Time No See," consisting of vocals—including the composer's repeated intoning of the music's title—and what might be snatches of soundtracks, largely unidentifiable, like the fractured images in the projections. Odd that when Brown's movement vocabulary evolved to the point where it became capable of sustaining our interest on its own, she began placing it in a context in which visual and aural décor compete for our attention. When her choreography was minimal and repetitious, the lack of décor and music was intended to force us to focus on the movement itself. In *Glacial Decoy* especially, the size and the literalness of the content of the images tend to draw one's eye away from the dance—a liability for those of us who are more interested in dance movement than in video-art installations and "art rock."

Scattered throughout both programs were excerpts from the dances Brown created for a production of *Carmen* directed by Lina Wertmüller in Naples last year. Performed here to recorded music and played out on a darkened, side-lit stage, all involved a procession of dancers, dressed in Spanish-style costume and assuming appropriately Iberian poses, inching their way across the front of the stage from right to left. Each excerpt had a gimmick. In the Prelude and Second Entr'acte, some dancers break away from the group and roll around on the ground. In the Third Entr'acte, a man stands in a stylized pose with his back to the audience at the left of the stage as a woman shuffles toward him; when she reaches him her feet continue their shuffling movement as he lowers her slowly, until she's flat on her face on the floor.

One admires the clever way in which Brown has managed to incorporate into her opera-ballet assignment some of her personal stylistic concerns, though one wonders what the connection is to Bizet's tragedy. In the end, Brown's Seville is not much different from her New Jersey.

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Art

The year of John Chamberlain

by William C. Agee

One of the most gratifying developments in the art world last year was the special attention given to the sculptor John Chamberlain. Although he has hardly been invisible of late—having exhibited regularly over the last five years—three recent exhibitions of Chamberlain's work in Los Angeles, Houston, and New York allowed us to see the artist in an entirely new light. The shows were augmented by the publication of Julie Sylvester's *John Chamberlain: A Catalogue Raisonné of the Sculpture 1954-1985,*[1] a most welcome event in itself but especially fortuitous this past year.

There are few artists over whom critical opinion has been so sharply divided as John Chamberlain. His work has always been conspicuous and instantly recognizable—factors which may have worked against him over time. From the start, he was accorded artistic and cultural notoriety because of his primary material: colored automobile steel. For some, this was cause for blind rejection; for others, it conferred on his work an instant celebrity status based on shock value. What could be more novel than crushed automobiles? No less an authority on contemporary taste than Hugh Hefner was an early collector, acquiring the 1964 *Bags Down* for the Playboy Club in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin.

Thus, the issue at first was Chamberlain's material, rather than the merits or failings of his art. Worse yet, his works were relegated to an aesthetic limbo by the view that they were simply so many car crashes, a sociological statement on the automobile and violence in American society. This pernicious idea began with a wall label at the Museum of Modern Art in the early Sixties, when MOMA acquired the great relief *Essex*; and it continues to the present day, for instance in the 1984 exhibition at the Whitney Museum's Fairfield County branch entitled *Autoscape: The Automobile in the American Landscape.* Chamberlain's persistent disclaimer that automobile steel is only a material, a free and plentiful material, has gone largely unheeded.

Chamberlain's art has also been entangled in questions concerning its artistic origins and its aesthetic allegiance. Some dismissed it as only a three-dimensional translation of Abstract Expressionist painting; others heralded it precisely *because* of this perception. It has also been seen as yet another manifestation of Pop Art. Clearly, Chamberlain has eluded easy classification, often to his detriment. By forcing us to reconsider his art, last year's exhibitions allowed us finally to see his real achievement.

The focal event of the year was Chamberlain's retrospective at the Museum of Con-

1 *John Chamberlain: A Catalogue Raisonné of the Sculpture 1954-1985,* by Julie Sylvester, with an essay by Klaus Kertess; Hudson Hills Press, in association with the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (240 pages, $50).

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temporary Art in Los Angeles (July 30-October 5, 1986). The catalogue raisonné, compiled by Julie Sylvester and published by the museum on the occasion of the exhibition, is a handsomely produced volume, a fine job of research that fulfills its primary function by giving us the full sweep and detail of Chamberlain's art in reproductions of the almost eight hundred sculptures he has produced over a thirty-year period. It is intelligently designed, with entries that appear on the same page as the photographs they refer to. Miss Sylvester's notes in the catalogue are especially illuminating; one only wishes they were more extensive. She approaches her subject from a steadfastly objective point of view, declining to interject her voice and choosing instead to present her information in a straightforward manner. The interview she has conducted with the artist is a wonderful document, fully conveying Chamberlain's open, unpretentious way of expressing himself on the "poetics and processes" at the heart of his work.

There are a few qualifications, however. The paintings, collages, early reliefs, and metal reliefs of 1964 are not reproduced in the catalogue; it is true that they fall outside the scope of the project, but they bear so closely on the evolution of Chamberlain's art that the reader will miss having at least some visual reference to them. In some cases, there is no photograph for a particular work, a fact that is not noted in the entry, resulting in some confusion as one searches for the illustration. Moreover, the black-and-white photographs of the early works are often small and dark. Fortunately, there is a generous use of color throughout the book, and almost all of the work after 1977 is reproduced in color, thereby greatly increasing its visibility. All in all, it must be said, the catalogue is a rich mine of visual and documentary information.

The Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles should be congratulated for having undertaken a complex and costly enterprise involving a difficult artist who is not currently fashionable. Such a combination is sure to be avoided these days; predictably, no other museum saw fit to pick up the exhibition. (That a show of this importance did not come to New York was especially lamentable, but that is another matter.) The exhibition was carefully selected and beautifully installed in the Temporary Contemporary, an industrial building well suited to Chamberlain's work. Each sculpture was given more than ample space, which helped confer a dramatic, even stately presence to the work and enhanced our perception of its multiple, ever-changing views. What is more, the exhibition was arranged in a straightforward chronological manner, giving us a much needed, step-by-step account of the artist's development and helping us to place him in the world of contemporary art.

That Chamberlain transcends the historical locus of Pop Art (if he ever belonged there at all) and of Abstract Expressionism was made clear by both the MOCA show and the catalogue raisonné. But it is still not the conventional view. In the catalogue for the Chamberlain show at the Menil Collection in Houston (which opened in June), for example, Walter Hopps defines Chamberlain's achievement as the sculptural equivalent of painting of the previous generation, that of Gorky, Kline and de Kooning.[2]

In fact, Chamberlain may be seen as part of a long and ongoing tradition of modernist sculpture, a tradition that his work touches on and inflects at divergent points. In his first sculptures of 1954-1957, on view at MOCA, the linear networks of welded steel demonstrate his early affinity with David Smith (born sixty miles from Chamberlain's home in Rochester, Indiana) and place Chamberlain squarely in the history of open constructivist sculpture. He remains in that history, for time and again Chamberlain

2 Walter Hopps's "Introduction" appears in *John Chamberlain Sculpture 1970s and 1980s,* published by The Menil Foundation (32 pages, $10). The Chamberlain exhibition is one of four inaugural installations of the Menil Collection in Houston and will be on display through February 1988.

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refers to himself as a "collagist" and collage is an approach integrally tied to constructed sculpture. In Chamberlain's hands, of course, collage is raised to a higher plane and given an expanded power and scale. In 1959, in pieces from his first maturity, such as *Zaar* and *Manitou*, a flat, planar Cubist structure is evident, much as it was in Smith's work of that time. Here the early genesis of Chamberlain's collage technique is clear.

Chamberlain's art soon became far denser and more volumetric, in part as a reaction to Smith's flatness. But it may well be that Smith retained for a time a more important, if residual, role for Chamberlain than has been remarked to date. While Chamberlain felt an instinctive kinship for the power of Kline and the form language of de Kooning, sculpture continued to be, for him, a space-filling medium conceived in a heroic and monumental vein. This level of ambition identifies him as an heir to Smith as much as to the painters of the time. Smith's example is also apparent in Chamberlain's commitment to industrial steel. Both artists worked in much the same way, amassing large quantities of steel, then sorting through them and selecting elements intuitively, building a sculpture part by part, creating a new whole.

As one moved through the MOCA exhibition, Chamberlain's work unfolded with an ease and certainty, even a grace, that almost belied the rawness of the materials and the artist's patently arduous working processes. His powers of invention—so strikingly obvious here—as well as the pervasive sense of multiplicity and complexity he manages to achieve throughout his work, will surely lay to rest the last vestiges of the notion that Chamberlain has only been elaborating a single theme over the years. One was especially struck by his ability to renew and reinvigorate his art at crucial turns, through both a formal inventiveness and a willingness to work with new materials. Seen in the context of the MOCA exhibition, Chamberlain's abandonment of colored steel from 1967 to 1972 takes on a new meaning. Where the foam rubber, plexiglas, and aluminum foil of that period once appeared (to this writer anyway) as diversions, they now seem consistent with his working methods of compressing and compacting. Like the foam-rubber pieces that make specific reference to the soft sculpture of Eva Hesse and Claes Oldenburg, all of the works of these years relate to the course of process art. Even if they are seldom equal to his work in steel, they looked better at MOCA than they ever had before.

Multiple, detached elements now constitute some of Chamberlain's best work. The MOCA show concluded with a first-rate example: the remarkable five-part *Straits of Night* (1986), surely a high point of recent American art. While there were certain pieces missing in the show, such as the classic 1962 *White Velvet,* the 1964 metal reliefs, and the recent large-scale *American Tableau*, the effect of the MOCA exhibition was that it left one wishing for more, a rare occurrence in a time of often oversized exhibitions. Certainly the show and the catalogue set a high standard for MOCA.

In the starkly beautiful setting of Marfa, a town in southwest Texas near the Mexican border, installations of Chamberlain's work are permanently on display. The art complex in Marfa—it is one of the biggest in the world, spreading over fifteen buildings and three hundred and fifty acres—was begun by Donald Judd in 1973 under the auspices of the Dia Foundation as an alternative to the exhibitions and "anthology" collections of museums. It is now operated by the Chinati Foundation and features, along with Chamberlain's work, installations by Judd himself. Plans for installations by Dan Flavin and Barnett Newman are under way.

In Marfa, we can focus on Chamberlain's work of the Seventies and early Eighties: thirty sculptures installed in a mammoth warehouse building. Some of the sculptures from the early Seventies, particularly "The Texas Pieces," done when he was just returning to the use of colored steel, are roughly oval in format, like the aluminum-foil pieces he was doing at the same time. Translated into steel, the configuration

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accounted for a bulk, density, and weight that was unprecedented. When we see these works alongside the more open sculptures at Marfa, we realize the amazing range of feeling Chamberlain is able to wrest from these seemingly intractable materials.

The intensity of our experience of Chamberlain's work comes in large measure from the variety of format in his art. He can work either large or small, on the floor or on the wall, in the round or in relief; he can make pieces from a few elements or a welter of parts, in horizontal or vertical dispositions. A major new avenue has been the "Gondola" series from 1981 and 1982, in which free, linear elements are attached to a low-lying automobile chassis, a format which acknowledges and inflects the issues of horizontality that were introduced by Anthony Caro. There seem to be fruitful possibilities here for Chamberlain to explore. It will be interesting to see whether he does.

Donald Judd was an early champion of Chamberlain's art and sustained his interest when few people had much good to say about it. Judd was quick to identify characteristics of Chamberlain's work that were relevant to the art of the Sixties. He pointed out, for example, that there was no hidden internal structure in Chamberlain's work (Chamberlain has used an armature only once). For Judd, each element had a specific, independent identity, and even details had an intrinsic structural place, although the actual structure was hardly evident. Chamberlain's use of lacquer and vivid motorcycle paints paralleled Judd's own explorations of the early Sixties, as did Chamberlain's geometric metal reliefs of 1964. Here is one more indication that the origins of Chamberlain's art extend to broader aesthetic territories than we had once supposed.

Where several of the Chamberlains in Marfa gave special insight into matters of volume and bulk, the work in the current exhibition at the Menil Collection—sculptures dating from 1977 to 1984—show Chamberlain's skill in handling size and scale. It should be said that the setting for the show cannot be better, for the Menil Collection's new building is a triumph. It was designed by Renzo Piano (although the sure and loving hand of Dominique de Menil is obvious throughout) with but one intention: the exhibition, care, and study of art. This is a radical, even bizarre, notion in this age of museum merchandising. At every turn, the installations are intelligently and painstakingly conceived, and the galleries unfailingly establish a welcoming ambience and rapport between spectator and object.

As the Menil show makes apparent, Chamberlain has embarked in recent years on an ambitious program of monumental sculpture. Outside the building there is the gently looming sixteen-foot vertical *Luftschloss* of 1979; in the special exhibition hall is the stunning *Dooms Day Flotilla* (1982), a seven-part work in the "Gondola" format extending seventeen feet laterally and made all the more effective by its lustrous surfaces of black, cream, and chromium hues. *The Line Up* (1982), a wall piece of abutting vertical elements that extends laterally for sixteen feet, constitutes Chamberlain's variant of serial imagery. Most impressive of all, however, is *The American Tableau* (shown in front of the Seagram Building a few years ago) that rises twelve feet at its highest point, extends almost twenty-one feet across the room, and is eleven feet wide at its deepest point. It may be taken as a summation of his art. The monumental and moving configurations and the positioning remind us of no less a cornerstone of modern sculpture than Rodin's *Burghers of Calais*.

From these serene corners of Texas to the predictably contentious atmosphere of the Whitney Biennial is a long way, but that is where Chamberlain unexpectedly appeared this spring. One piece here, a narrow vertical, was sandwiched between two outsized paintings by Julian Schnabel; the other, the 1986 *First Dance of Trees*, was placed directly in front of the large window on the fourth floor, a position that effectively washed it out and made it all but invisible except from the back. Still, Chamberlain's work stood out as among the very best in the show.

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The confidence and command that Chamberlain's work now exudes was also evident at his show at the Xavier Fourcade Gallery in May and June. Here the authority was expressed in the shifting configurations of his sculpture: the gentle curve of a vertical wall piece; the upright columnar works of closely meshed, rolled sheets of metal; and a roughly T-shaped piece that leaned against the wall, barely touching the floor, almost levitating. At the same time, in the tight quarters of the gallery, a familiar piece such as the multiple-part *Straits of Night* revealed an entirely different presence than it had at MOCA. Such adaptability is Chamberlain's answer to site-specific sculpture. What is more, his verve is now so strong that he can easily make reference to older formats while extending his art. A low-lying, horizontal table piece recalled the frontal disposition of early planar works while again engaging issues raised by Anthony Caro. Chamberlain's color now moves between the familiar melange of intense, discordant hues and the simple, dulled hues of his first works in colored steel.

Chamberlain's unfettered sense of invention is such that it is rivaled today only by Frank Stella, whose relief paintings may in fact owe at least a partial debt to him. In any case, we were witness last year to a flow of work of high and substantial quality, a level rare for any artist. After some time of relative neglect, the past year's events should go a long way in according Chamberlain his due recognition, for, by any standard, he is one of the truly first-rate abstract artists working today.

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Books

Rousseau's "virtue"

by Roger Kimball

I think I know man, but as for men, I know them not.
—Jean-Jacques Rousseau

It is said that the single ornament adorning the walls of Immanuel Kant's sparsely furnished study was a portrait of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Tradition also has it that the only occasion on which Kant neglected his daily walk—proverbially so punctual that his neighbors in Königsberg set their watches by it—was in 1762 when Rousseau's novel *Émile* appeared and Kant sat reading it the whole day, utterly enthralled. What did the philosopher find so appealing about Rousseau? One would be hard pressed to think of two more divergent personalities. The chaste, dutiful, overwhelmingly intellectual Kant and the famously erratic Rousseau, with his personal excesses, his celebration of feeling and sentiment, and his strident pronouncements about the corrupting effects of modern civilization: they could not have been more at odds with each other. Yet Kant credited Rousseau with a great deal. "I am myself an inquirer by inclination," he wrote when he was forty. "I feel a consuming thirst for knowledge and a restless passion to advance in it . . . . There was a time when I thought this alone could constitute the honor of mankind, and I despised the common man who knows nothing. Rousseau set me right."

In essence, what Kant gleaned from Rousseau was a new appreciation of the part that freedom and feeling play in man's moral life. He learned that reason, even if it was the key to knowledge, was not the measure of man. As the German neo-Kantian philosopher Ernst Cassirer observed in his classic 1932 monograph, *The Problem of Jean-Jacques Rousseau,* Rousseau's basic contribution to the age was to have freed it "from the domination of intellectualism. To the forces of rationalist understanding, on which rested the culture of the eighteenth century, he opposed the force of feeling . . . . It was, in fact," Cassirer adds, "a completely new current of life that penetrated into French spirituality and threatened to dissolve all its established forms and flood its carefully erected dikes."

One may credit Cassirer's point while still pausing to remark on his choice of metaphors. What he had in mind, of course, was the hidebound, decaying aristocratic society through which Rousseau's thought swept like a tidal wave. But it is worth noting that dikes are generally erected for a good reason, and that their dissolution brings not liberation but death and destruction. From this point of view, Cassirer's words of praise may also be seen as implicitly expressing a serious criticism. Rousseau's breathtaking megalomania and self-absorption, his recklessly utopian vision of the inherent goodness of man and the state of nature, the woeful legacy of his political ideas—all this did indeed help undermine the established institutions of French life.

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And though French society in the late eighteenth century was in many respects corrupt, the nature of Rousseau's assault has brought him as many critics as champions. He has been attacked by thinkers ranging from his erstwhile friends Voltaire and Diderot to the great nineteenth-century French critic Hippolyte Taine and many contemporary writers. The historian J. L. Talmon, for example, has warned that the natural outcome of Rousseau's doctrine of popular sovereignty is dictatorship, and that his much discussed notion of a general will "becomes the driving force of totalitarian democracy." That Rousseau must number Maximilien Robespierre and Antoine-Louis Saint-Just among his most ardent admirers —that these architects of the French Revolution's Reign of Terror saw themselves as presiding over the birth of Rousseau's ideal society—gives at least circumstantial support to Talmon's contention.

No doubt the wildly conflicting assessments of Rousseau's character, work, and influence token something about what one might generously call the ambiguity of his achievement. No doubt, too, such ambiguity helps to explain why he has lately received such loving scrutiny from Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man, and many of their epigones in contemporary literary criticism. The tensions (not to say downright contradictions) that litter Rousseau's texts, his extravagant theories about the origins of language, and—what is by no means the least seductive element—the kinky, narcissistic eroticism that permeates *The Confessions* and *La Nouvelle Héloïse* have all helped to make his work a happy hunting ground for eager deconstructionists. In any event, just as there are few, even among Rousseau's enemies, who would deny his extraordinary literary gifts or passion, so there are few who would accede to the cult of Rousseau, extolling his personal behavior or crediting him, as he did himself, with being a fount of benignity and virtue, a walking example of the intrinsic goodness of humanity. Opinion remains deeply divided about the cogency and ultimate value of Rousseau's thought, especially the political dimension of his thought.

It is the great merit of Carol Blum's new book, *Rousseau and the Republic of Virtue: The Language of Politics in the French Revolution,*[1] that it sheds light on the political and moral aspects of Rousseau's legacy. Drawing on the work of the distinguished Rousseau scholar Jean Starobinski, Professor Blum, who teaches French at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, traces the career of Rousseau's peculiar notion of virtue. She shows how it informed his own political thought—illuminating such central Rousseauvian concepts as the general will and the state of nature—and the political thought and action of Rousseau's spiritual heirs, Robespierre and Saint-Just. Indeed, in showing how Rousseau's notion of the virtuous self became "a model for political discourse during the Revolution," Professor Blum does not merely provide insight into the well-worn subject of Rousseau's influence on the French Revolution; she also provides considerable insight into the psychology of tyranny and the essentially narcissistic foundations of Rousseau's brand of moralizing politics.

But despite the political aspect of its subject, Professor Blum's book is more an exercise in literary criticism and intellectual biography than in political science. Because it was Rousseau's "moral" works that made the deepest impression on the architects of the Revolution, forming their initial understanding of Rousseau and their goal as revolutionary leaders, Professor Blum features *Émile, La Nouvelle Héloïse,* and *The Confessions* over more overtly political tracts like *The Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* and *The Social Contract.* Furthermore, the reader will find in these pages scant explicit discussion of the partisan struggles that erupted in the course of the Revolution, even less about its economic or political background. What he will find is a scrupulous examination—

1 *Rousseau and the Republic of Virtue: The Language of Politics in the French Revolution,* by Carol Blum; Cornell University Press, 302 pages, $24.95.

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Herbin at Janis

part psychological, part literary—of a mode of thought that can be said to have been inaugurated by Rousseau and that was translated onto the stage of world politics by Robespierre and Saint-Just.

It must be pointed out, however, that *Rousseau and the Republic of Virtue* is very much an academic treatise. Professor Blum proceeds with an elaborate scholarly apparatus—including many long footnotes with references to arcane studies—that sometimes does more to obscure than illumine her subject. And though she is capable of writing with considerable verve and even brilliance at times, the book is also marred by occasional descents to the clotted argot that has become a disfiguring feature of so much contemporary academic prose. Near the beginning of the book, for example, Professor Blum complains that the idea of virtue has been shunted aside in most recent studies of the influence of Rousseau's thought on the French Revolution. She goes on to tell us that "this rejection of the word has hindered the assimilation of denotations and connotations into adequate conceptual frameworks as well. The term as cipher inevitably befogs ancillary propositions." Befogs indeed. Fortunately, Professor Blum's obvious engagement with her subject and the inherent interest of the material she has assembled tend to minimize such defects.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was born in Geneva in 1712, scarcely ten months after his father had returned from several years' cloistered employment as a watchmaker in a Sultan's harem in Constantinople. His mother died a few days after he was born, and Jean-Jacques was brought up by his father and an aunt. Though Isaac Rousseau provided his son with little formal education, he did teach him to read, using as primers sentimental novels and Plutarch's *Lives,* reading material that can be seen to have made an indelible impression on Jean-Jacques's imagination. The young Rousseau was briefly apprenticed in turn to a notary and an engraver, but his early life was very unsettled and included much wandering. Under the influence of a

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Mme. de Warens—one of a series of rich women whose protection and sexual favors he would enjoy—Rousseau converted (temporarily, as it happened) to Roman Catholicism from his native Calvinism. Later, in 1740, he became a private tutor in Lyons; he soon left, convinced of his ineptitude at teaching. But the experience occasioned thoughts on the nature of education that later found their way into *Émile.* Rousseau's travels over the next few years took him to Paris, where he attempted, vainly, to spark interest in a system of musical notation he had devised. In 1743, he had a brief stint as secretary to the French ambassador in Venice. A quarrel precipitated his return to Paris, where he was introduced to d'Alembert and Diderot, who invited him to contribute pieces on musical subjects to the *Encyclopédie.*

But Rousseau's literary career did not begin in earnest until 1750, when he won a prize for his essay in a competition sponsored by the Dijon Academy on the question: "Has the restoration of the arts and sciences had a purifying effect upon morals?" Rousseau's answer in the *Discourse on the Moral Effects of the Arts and Sciences* was a resounding "No!" The arts and sciences, he wrote, were products of human pride (a subject, one supposes, on which Rousseau could expatiate with authority). They were at once the result and the cause of idleness and vanity; they encouraged "luxury" and a decline of the simple "military qualities" that virtue requires. (Sparta and Republican Rome provided Rousseau with his stern models of the virtuous society.) "Let men learn for once that nature would have preserved them from science, as a mother snatches a dangerous weapon from the hands of her child. Let them know that all the secrets she hides are so many evils from which she protects them . . . ." No less pernicious in his view were the arts, which pandered to popular taste and corrupted morals. Printing, the vehicle for all this perfidy, came in for special criticism. "If we consider the frightful disorders which printing has already caused in Europe," Rousseau insisted in his essay, which was duly printed and circulated to considerable notice, ". . . it is easy to foresee that sovereigns will hereafter take as much pains to banish this dreadful art from their dominions, as they ever took to encourage it."

The First Discourse is not generally considered one of Rousseau's more convincing works; but it is certainly representative of his temperament. The extraordinary intellectual bravura, bordering on myth-making, the unremitting attack on contemporary manners and morals, and the novel blend of excessive sentimentality and puritanical sternness come together here to define the quintessential Rousseauvian style—a style crystalized at the end of the essay when this most complicated of men bursts out with a paean to "Virtue! Sublime science of simple souls." The essay also helps explain what made Rousseau electrifyingly attractive to so many of his contemporaries. For no small part of his appeal was his ability to tap a vein of feeling and experience in his readers that they recognized but lacked the vocabulary to express. As Professor Blum puts it in her discussion of Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1755), "When he described the presocietal, preverbal innocence of the species, his audience responded with an inchoate sense of recognition, which generated an utter conviction all the more compelling for not being objectively verifiable. The presentation of the past of every man as the situation of primitive man invested Rousseau's writings with a stamp of indubitable and mysterious authority."

Rousseau did everything he could to cultivate that aura of indubitable and mysterious authority. Near the beginning of the *Confessions,* he recalled setting out in his youth: "I was entering the wide world confidently," he wrote, "my value was going to fill it. By showing myself I was going to be the center of attention of the entire universe." The success of the First Discourse and—especially—of his opera *The Village Soothsayer,* also from 1750, came close to granting him that attention, at least in the universe of Parisian society. Somehow,

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though, the experience was not quite what Rousseau expected. "The nobles, the rich, the elegant woman were at his feet," Professor Blum writes, "and he made the astonishing discovery that the more contempt he showed for them, the more devoted they were." By the mid-1750s, Rousseau found himself unhappy with the press of city life and in 1756 went to live for some months in a small country cottage in Montmorency that belonged to another of his rich "protectoresses," Mme. d'Epinay. This marked the beginning of his withdrawal from society and adoption of the role of "self-sufficing Sage." The following years saw the publication of some of Rousseau's most influential works, including *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse* in 1761 and *Émile* and *The Social Contract,* both of which appeared in 1762. Yet Rousseau's withdrawal from society was not without its own complications. For how could he be the center of attention of the entire universe at the same time that he had resolved to quit society and give himself over to cultivating and enjoying his own virtue? As Professor Blum remarks, "having equated the virtuous, the natural, and the asocial, yet . . . needing to dazzle and to fascinate, he was in a dilemma of his own making." It is not clear that he ever managed to resolve that dilemma to his satisfaction.

In 1745, Rousseau had met Thérèse Le Vasseur, a semi-literate servant girl who became his mistress and intermittent companion for life. In *The Confessions* (which were published posthumously), Rousseau declares his affection for Thérèse, but explains that he became involved with her largely out of pity and that he "never felt the least glimmering of love for her." Nonetheless, he had five children by her, all of whom he sent to a foundlings' home despite what he described as the "groans" of their mother—groans, incidentally, that may have been inspired as much by fear for the infants' fate as by frustrated maternity. According to Professor Blum, fewer than one baby in five survived longer than six months at such institutions.

Rousseau returns time and again to the subject of his children, explicitly in *The Con-*

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fessions, implicitly in other works when he argues for dissolving the family and giving children up to be reared by the state. Everywhere he is at pains to exculpate himself, to assure his many critics that he had done the right thing in abandoning his own children and that they were actually much better off being (as he put it) "educated" by the state. Be that as it may, after the fifth child Rousseau solved the problem of Thérèse's fertility by renouncing sexual relations with her and turning instead to masturbation. This was apparently altogether a more satisfactory arrangement, at least for Rousseau, for it also placated his fear that having sex with women was bad for his health. Moreover, it freed him to concentrate more intently on his favorite subjects—himself and his subjective feelings of virtue. "With himself as sexual partner," Professor Blum comments, "Rousseau wrote of turning to his own fantasies for sensual pleasure, withdrawing from the real world and plunging into his own mind to maintain the feelings of virtue which he called necessary to his well being."

Rousseau's behavior with regard to Thérèse and their children illustrates a cardinal point about his understanding of virtue—namely, that it had nothing to do with *action* and everything to do with his *feeling* virtuous. In this Rousseau departed dramatically from the dominant current of Enlightenment thought, which looked primarily to a person's actions for its measure of virtue. "What is virtue, my friend?" Voltaire asked. "It is to do good: let us do it, and that's enough. We won't look into your motives." For Rousseau, on the contrary, the criterion of virtue was solely his inner feeling of goodness, a feeling so sweet that he describes himself in *The Confessions* as being "drunk with virtue." Needless to say, Rousseau's increasingly strident insistence on his own virtue did not endear him to the likes of Voltaire or Diderot, who found their former protégé more and more insufferable.

Yet the extreme subjectivity of Rousseau's notion of virtue is the key to many aspects of his thought. For one thing, it helps explain the absolute assurance with which he delivered his denunciations of society and his ever growing list of enemies. As Professor Blum notes, Rousseau "repeatedly explained that his happiness depended on his union with goodness and, therefore, that anything that made him unhappy must be evil and false." Alas, Rousseau's tenacity in clinging to that twisted logic was exceeded only by his enormous capacity for unhappiness.

Furthermore, Rousseau's thoroughly subjective notion of virtue has a disturbing political corollary, which shows itself most clearly in his much controverted notion of the general will. "If you would have the general will accomplished," he wrote in the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality,* "bring all the particular wills into conformity with it; in other words, as virtue is nothing more than this conformity of the particular wills with the general will, establish the reign of virtue." Of course, the great impediment to establishing this "reign of virtue" is the recalcitrance of "particular wills," the untidy reality of individuals who have different, often competing, interests. And because there can be no compromise where virtue is concerned, the successful legislator must be willing to suppress all individual interests—indeed, all individuality—for the sake of the whole. As Rousseau explains in *The Social Contract,* "Those who dare to undertake the institution of a people must feel themselves capable, as it were, of changing human nature, of transforming each individual . . . into a part of a much greater whole, from which he in some measure receives his being and his life; of altering the constitution of man for the purpose of strengthening it."

But if the goal of political action is to establish the "reign of virtue," and virtue itself is simply the unimpeded expression of Rousseau's own sensibility, then it also follows, as Professor Blum observes, that "the good state was composed not of discrete individual persons, in whom Rousseau recognized evil, but of a single being, himself, inflated to the boundaries of a nation." She rightly remarks that "such total fusion with the collective ego became the *political* equiv-

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alent of the personal inversion that Rousseau had labeled 'virtue.' As in the case of the individual, this virtue had no relationship to performing good acts." Moreover, this deeply subjective notion of virtue helps explain why the emotion of pity figures so importantly in Rousseau's thought. Pity provides a bridge between individuals without encroaching upon their essential separateness or self-absorption. In this sense, Professor Blum writes, pity "requires no awareness of other human beings because it is a feeling that causes the individual to experience the sufferings of others *as if they were his own.* It is merely an altered mode of experiencing the self by melting emotionally into the victim." At bottom, Rousseau really had only two great objects of pity: mankind as a whole and himself. The particular sufferings of mere individuals never much captured his sympathy.

Such narcissistic megalomania is a prescription for estrangement from the world around one, and it is not surprising that as time went on Rousseau was increasingly beset by feelings of isolation and persecution. As the bearer of the great truth of man's primal innocence and goodness, Rousseau saw himself as the inaugurator of a new age. That the world was deaf to his liberating message could only mean that the world had been corrupted. The more blameless he felt himself, the more guilty and vicious the world must be. This culminated in the terrible conviction that the world around him was full, not of human beings, but of evil automata in human form. "Since Rousseau knew that mankind was, like him, good," Professor Blum writes, "he was forced to the awful but inevitable realization that the creatures who treated him so heartlessly were not *really people* at all, that the key to the mystery was that 'my contemporaries were but mechanical beings in regard to me who acted only by impulsion and whose actions I could calculate only by the laws of movement.'" It is in this context that we must understand the pathetic, bewildered confession that he made late in life: "I think I know man, but as for men, I know them not."

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In his last years (he died in 1778), Rousseau thus felt himself to be totally isolated, surrounded by strange beings that were inexplicably indifferent or even hostile in the face of his obvious virtue. As these feelings of paranoia took hold of him, Rousseau became obsessed with the thought that he must undergo a great trial to vindicate himself. He saw himself as a kind of Christ figure, doomed to martyrdom, though, as Professor Blum notes, his "wish was not to imitate Jesus Christ, but to compete with him." The other side of this craving for martyrdom was a conviction that the world must be purged of its corruption in order that the essential goodness of mankind might prevail. And throughout it all, Rousseau kept devising strategies to convince an unwilling world of his untainted virtue. In *Rousseau juge de Jean-Jacques,* a late work comprising a series of dialogues between characters named "Rousseau," "Jean-Jacques," and "a Frenchman," "Rousseau" declares that "I have read the entire works claimed by Jean-Jacques several times, and the total effect on my soul was always to make me more human, more just, better than I was before. Never have I concerned myself with these works without profit for virtue. I am sure that the effect they produce on me would be the same on any decent man who would read them with the same impartiality." This salubrious effect was apparently so patent to Rousseau that he concluded *The Confessions* by insisting that anyone who contemplated his life and work and could still doubt his virtue "ought to be strangled."

In the second half of her book, Professor Blum details the political re-enactment of Rousseau's notion of virtue by Robespierre and Saint-Just, from its foundation in narcissism to its culmination in violence and paranoia. Though she notes that their interpretation of Rousseau was in some respects "narrow" and "unnuanced," she insists that it was nonetheless faithful to a "central core" of Rousseau's thought. "Whereas other politicians could use Rousseau's name, could look up a few passages for a speech, could remember some of the phrases, Robespierre and Saint-Just did not bolster their arguments with Rousseau's virtue, they possessed it. The words, the affective links between ideas, the easy melting and crystallizing of identity with the 'people' against its enemies, these sources of strength were inside them, not outside." One may begin to appreciate the extent to which Rousseau's theory of virtue (if "theory" is the correct term) became a model for political discourse in the French Revolution by considering these lines from Robespierre's "Dedication to Jean-Jacques Rousseau":

> Divine man, you taught me to know myself: while I was still young you made me appreciate the dignity of my nature and the great principles of the social order . . . . The consciousness of having wanted the good of his fellow beings is the recompense of the virtuous man; then comes the gratitude of the peoples who surround his memory with the honors due to him . . . even when he purchases them at the price of a premature death.
>
> Your example is there, before my eyes, your admirable *Confessions,* that free and courageous emanation of the purest soul, will go on to posterity less as a model of art than as a prodigy of virtue. I wish to follow your venerable footsteps, . . . happy if, in the perilous career that an unprecedented revolution just opened before us, I remain constantly faithful to the inspirations I found in your texts!

"The dignity of my nature and the great principles of the social order": as for Rousseau, so for Robespierre the two were inseparable. And note that the single-minded pursuit of this virtue culminated in a premonition of sacrifice and "premature death."

Saint-Just and Robespierre each "described making himself into a new man by means of virtue," Professor Blum writes, "and offered this exemplary being to the nation as a constant object of admiration, of pity, and of fear." And the fear, it cannot be emphasized too much, was the necessary complement of the allegiance to virtue. Thus it was that Robespierre could say—in a remark that chill-

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ingly epitomizes the revolutionary's ethic—that the Republic was founded on "virtue and its emanation, terror." In attempting to establish a Republic founded on "virtue and its emanation, terror," Robespierre was obviously not engaged in political organization in the ordinary sense. On the contrary, he was, in Professor Blum's words, "invoking a state of emotional fusion between his good self and the emanation of that self which he called 'the people,' or 'the Republic' or 'the Fatherland.'" The aim was to "distill France into one undefiled being with which virtuous Frenchmen could merge." Anything that stood in the way of achieving that organic unity of *le peuple,* any merely individual interest, had to be ruthlessly expunged from the body politic.

But because *le peuple* was an empty abstraction, the search for enemies inexorably excluded more and more individuals and classes from the golden circle of the elect. Initially, the enemy was identified as the royalists and nobles. But in time the list came to include anyone whose entire being was not committed to championing the Republic. "In pursuit of ultimate virtue," Professor Blum writes, "Robespierre, like Rousseau, reached the point of sacrificing every other value, including life itself. . . ." Above all, the give and take of ordinary politics was forbidden: there could be no compromise with virtue. In a seemingly endless series of harangues, Robespierre and Saint-Just (whose clipped, terse syntax Camus summed up as *style guillotine*) wove a utopian dream in which all distinction between ruler and ruled would vanish, indeed, in which all separate consciousness would vanish. Again like Rousseau, both were totally infatuated with their own virtue, and could not understand why the populace was not convulsed with gratitude and love for their labors on behalf of the Republic. As the Terror progressed, indiscriminately sending thousands of French men and women to their death, moderate elements within the government began to rebel, seeking to put an end to the bloodshed. Their demands for compromise pushed Robespierre and Saint-Just to a new pitch of frenzy. More and more they entertained dark forebodings of their own martyrdom for the cause of the French Republic. After being denounced at a political meeting, Robespierre demanded that he himself be put to death. His wish was granted. In a gruesomely appropriate culmination to the orgy of violence they had engineered, Robespierre and Saint-Just were guillotined together in July 1794.

By the end of *Rousseau and the Republic of Virtue,* Professor Blum has gathered the materials for a devastating indictment of Rousseau, his concept of virtue, and the political enactment of that virtue by Robespierre and Saint-Just. She has gathered the materials—but she forbears to deliver the indictment. In fact, the main failing of this valuable study is its curious reluctance to draw conclusions. Though one is seldom in doubt about where Professor Blum stands, there persists what can only be called the posture of academic evenhandedness throughout the book. Rousseau's notion of virtue is revealed to be a dangerous narcissistic fantasy, yet we are admonished to avoid a moralistic or partisan reading of his work. Robespierre is exposed as the monster that he was, but Professor Blum indulges in ritual assurances about his "forceful idealism" and cautions against making him a scapegoat. There are powerful lessons to be drawn from the story that Professor Blum recounts, but she is reticent about formulating them explicitly.

Perhaps the chief lesson concerns the tyranny exercised by the rhetoric of virtue. For what we see in Rousseau, as in Robespierre and Saint-Just, is the deadly harvest that can result from the triumph of rhetoric over reality. "Man is born free, but we see him everywhere in chains," Rousseau writes in the famous opening passages of *The Social Contract.* How inspiring, how noble-sounding—but is it true? In what sense is man really "born free"? In what sense is he "everywhere in chains"? Then again, Rousseau's notion of the general will promises to establish "the reign of virtue," but it is in fact a

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recipe for the suppression of the exercise of virtue in any ordinary sense. Precisely because the general will is in principle indivisible, it is necessarily opposed to the interests of each will in particular. As Hannah Arendt notes in *On Revolution* (1963), in a passage that anticipates the kernel of Professor Blum's argument, "the theory of terror from Robespierre to Lenin and Stalin presupposes that the interest of the whole must . . . be hostile to the particular interest of the citizen. One has often been struck," Arendt continues,

> by the peculiar selflessness of the revolutionists, which should not be confused with 'idealism' or heroism. Virtue has indeed been equated with selflessness ever since Robespierre preached a virtue that was borrowed from Rousseau, and it is the equation which has put, at it were, its indelible stamp upon the revolutionary man and his innermost conviction that the value of a policy may be gauged by the extent to which it will contradict all particular interests . . . ."

Arendt goes on to stress the central role that the Rousseauvian notions of pity and compassion played in the unfolding of the Revolution. For it was pity that allowed the architects of the Terror to *sentimentalize* the French people, to view them as one abstract suffering mass in need of redemption by virtue. And in this sense, she writes, quoting from a petition of the Paris Commune to the National Convention, pity "has proved to possess a greater capacity for cruelty than cruelty itself. 'Par pitié, par amour pour l'humanité, soyez inhumains!' " The point is that sentiments, as distinguished from mere principles, are not limited by concrete interests: they are concerned not with the suffering of particular people but with an abstract, boundless suffering of the multitude whose name is *les malheureux.* Hence it was only natural that Robespierre, a virtuoso of Rousseauvian pity, should have found himself singularly indifferent to the very real suffering of individuals all around him, but nonetheless transported by ecstasies of pity at the thought of the sufferings of that faceless, impalpable entity, *le peuple.*

Regrettably, Rousseau and Robespierre have not been the last to be "drunk with virtue." Indeed, the effects of that powerful intoxicant can be seen writ large in the savage tumult of twentieth-century political history. The spectacle of Pol Pot ravaging Cambodia in the name of his Marxist agrarian fantasy provides a particularly murderous contemporary example. *Rousseau and the Republic of Virtue,* quite apart from its substantial scholarly contribution, can help us reflect critically on the rhetorical and psychological foundations of such phenomena. Its chief message can perhaps be best formulated as a plea: Preserve us from the virtuous.

Ruskin according to Proust

Marcel Proust On Reading Ruskin: Prefaces to *La Bible d'Amiens* and *Sésame et les Lys* with Selections from the Notes to the Translated Texts. Translated and edited by Jean Autret, William Burford, and Phillip J. Wolfe, with an introduction by Richard Macksey. Yale University Press, 227 pages, $18.50

reviewed by Guy Davenport

Flaubert's *Trois contes* (1877) is a medieval stained-glass window in a cathedral depicting the legend of St. Julian the Hospitaller flanked by a modern saint whose virtue exemplifies that of Julian, and by John the Baptist, whose martyrdom is the archaic fact generating Julian and Félicité. The design of this work allows for resonances among the three stories of such a symbolic and aesthetic richness that the reading of them helplessly becomes a meditation. We see that the three stories are somehow one story. The whole art of narrative is before us, inviting but not demanding attention. The perspective leads us to the cathedral window: it is a

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text for the illiterate, to be interpreted in sermons and religious instruction, as Flaubert shows us in the scene of Virginie's first communion in the first story, *Un coeur simple,* and as he himself translates one window into narrative in *St.-Julien.* Another window supplies the matter of the third story, *Hérodias.*

The triumph of these three stories is in each of them being shaped by a different power of the imagination, requiring a different style and tone. Flaubert was preparing the ground for Joyce's polyphony as well as for Proust's harmonizing of diverse narrative tactics into one magnificent maneuver.

Flaubert's three styles are: a painterly realism, for which we can find an analogue in Pissarro or Courbet (sharing their preoccupation with roads, villages, and farms); the style used for saints' lives in the *Legenda Aurea* (from which the modern short story develops, as we can see happening in Boccaccio), supplemented by color and drawing derived from medieval illuminated books such as *Les très riches heures*; and the archeological style for bringing the deep past into immediate and tactile reality which Flaubert invented for *Salammbô.*

We cannot trace Proust to these Flaubertian instigations without an intervening stage. Proust took nothing raw from any source. His syntheses are complex and with an interacting geometry. Flaubert's three transparences depend for their success on the central stained-glass window. The implications of that window for an artist were, as Flaubert demonstrated, immense and exciting. It was the rendering of a Biblical text into another medium, and at a particular time, so that we have to look at it understanding two forces at once, one from the first century, another from the twelfth, both present in the nineteenth, and both acting simultaneously in the onwardness and the stillness of time.

The writer who had studied the Gothic painted window most imaginatively was John Ruskin. In 1900 the twenty-nine-year-old Proust published his translation of Ruskin's *The Bible of Amiens,* a genre-defying, Shandying work, typically late Ruskin. Its mercurial center, now here, now there, is its exposition of the Gothic cathedral of Amiens as a Bible in stone, its elaborate sculptures and windows being an equivalent of a text. Ruskin assumed, as Proust would assume in *A la recherche du temps perdu,* an audience that was sometimes a congregation hearing moral instruction (allowing him to refer to a work of art, much as a priest might keep pointing to a particular window in his church), sometimes a group of travellers in need of a guide, sometimes simply fellow human beings who enjoy gossip and confidences. Ruskin quite early began to use the digression as a major device of style, and later saw in his infinitely branching digressions (*Fors Clavigera* is a long work of nothing but) "Gothic generosity"—the polar opposite of Classical restraint.

Ruskin the Fundamentalist Christian obviously saw Gothic generosity as a quality kin to Hebraic narrative art. The Bible has as firm and geometric a structure as Chartres, but it is a structure of cross-references and epic repetitions, of many genres—psalm, national history, philosophy, drama, letters, exhortations—serving a common purpose. Proust would meditate on the polar opposition of Jerusalem and Athens, a tension in which he would suspend many of his themes, but would elect Ruskin's mode of Gothic generosity. He frequently called *A la recherche* "his cathedral."

The young Proust, dandy and *snob* (best translated as "connoisseur"), fell under the spell of Ruskin. His English was shaky (he worked from trots made by his mother, and consulted a veritable committee of friends to keep his text accurate), but his fervor got him through all of Ruskin. The notes he provides are amplifications of *The Bible of Amiens* and *Sesame and Lilies,* connecting these books to relevant passages in Ruskin's larger works.

Richard Macksey, professor of comparative literature at Johns Hopkins, has written a scholarly and sensitive introduction to this translation of Proust's two prefaces to Ruskin (together with a selection of Proust's

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notes). Professor Macksey accounts for how Proust came to do the translations, how he did them, and of what significance they are to our understanding and appreciation of Proust.

The two prefaces are quite different. The one to *The Bible of Amiens* is a declaration of love for Ruskin as well as a critical and cautious assessment in which Proust shows that he does not subscribe wholly to all of Ruskin's ideas, and does not consider Ruskin a high priest of a religion of Beauty. The second preface, to *Sesame and Lilies,* is the more engaging, the more "Proustian," as we can now say. In it he becomes the author of *A la recherche.* Taking Ruskin's method of meditating on anything and everything, he describes his room in Illiers (Combray), muses on reading, on the spirituality of things. Ruskin is the philosopher of clutter (in his house at Brantwood, in the foreground of Turner's landscapes, in Gothic detail); Proust becomes one, too. With Ruskinian squirrelity he traces a lithograph of a general from its appearance in the house, brought by his grandfather, to its exile in his room, where all clutter was welcome, to its reincarnation as an image on a commercial poster in the dining room of the station hotel (only recognition is true knowledge). Proust, the poet of the gratuitously tangential and of essences as spiritual signs, would not want me to omit here that when I had lunch in this same station hotel a few years ago, which, like the large part of Illiers-Combray (it wears its fictional name hyphenated with its real one), is little changed, the dining room was still decorated with posters, one of which was of Proust, replacing, I would like to think, the military personage of his youth. Except that part of this preface is lifted from the abandoned *Jean Santeuil,* we could say we are witnessing the birth of Proust from a rich and well laid Ruskinian mulch.

Professor Macksey gives an eloquent account of how Proust absorbed and digested Ruskin, how Ruskin forms a donation into Proust's genius. It is a large donation indeed. Ruskin's interpretation of Giotto's frescoes bleeds through Proust, a detectable under-drawing (once we know about it) in which Giotto's allegorical Vices and Virtues become characters; a working title for a section of *Le temps retrouvé* was *Les vices et les vertus de Padoue et de Combray.*

When he had read Proust, Santayana wrote several friends to admit, with some astonishment, that his whole doctrine of essences, evolved in *Skepticism and Animal Faith* and in *The Realms of Being,* had been anticipated and worked out by Proust, according him the status of a philosopher and involving him in a simultaneous discovery. Bergson was in a position to do the same, though the parallelism of their treatment of time is a commonplace observation.

Proust's synthesis of his age transcended Ruskin's, and continues to synthesize as his work takes its place at the center of his epoch. Roger Shattuck has written cunningly about Proust and optics. Proust is greatly involved in the recovery of Vermeer. The worlds of Monet and Proust have merged. César Franck and Fantin-Latour, Haussmann's boulevards and Art Nouveau fall within Proust's aesthetic territory. We must revise Gothic Generosity to mean Gothic Acquisitiveness.

To Professor Macksey's extensive analysis of Proust's schooling at Ruskin's knees we ought to add the *culte des jeunes filles* which Ruskin (in one of those feints which Proust detected in him as intellectual dishonesty) elaborated as a sustained sublimation of his arrested sexuality. The *culte* is extensive, and has its origins in Rousselian romanticism, in Wordsworth, in Blake, in Philipp Otto Runge, in Francis Jammes, in Whistler, in Henry James, to name but a few adepts. But even here Proust will use nothing he has not processed in the labyrinthine system of correspondences of his alchemy. Proust's frieze (his word) of girls in white dresses (Joycean transmutation of the flowering hawthorne, which Proust takes from *The Bible of Amiens,* Ruskin's raptures and all) with Albertine as their leader is introduced as so many Artemids, vessels

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of virginity and innocence. This is the way Ruskin wanted us to think of the children he adored. But Proust takes them over in a doubled acquisition, along with the Little Bands of girls and sissies from Fourier's utopian Harmony (*Petite Bande* is Fourier's phrase). To them Proust can then add their corresponding Fourierist Little Hordes, which was of boys and tomboys, and place them on Boudin's Normandy sands. Over the years they will grow old and vicious, and Proust's slow and unforgiving revelations will open before us in a moral vision of which Ruskin had no notion.

Proust and Ruskin are an example of pupil and teacher wherein the pupil took, with splendid comprehension, everything the teacher knew, paid the teacher the highest gratitude, and then remade all that he had learned into a matter wholly his own. One good of this edition (the first in English) of Proust's writings about Ruskin is to remind ourselves of Proust's scholarly talents: a scholar of many talents, we should say. He is a rival of Montaigne as a humanist scholar; he is a great critic of literature and art; a psychologist; a geographer; an historian. (He liked to arrange his household staff around his bed and give them lectures on French history). And Ruskin may have also shown Proust, by bad example, how to write an enormous book into which everything he knew could be put. Ruskin's books are all like provincial museums with a long-winded guide. No matter how carefully he worked them out, as with *The Stones of Venice* and *Modern Painters,* they tended toward the grand and wonderful clutter of *The Bible of Amiens* and *Fors Clavigera.* (Ruskin once began an Oxford lecture on Michelangelo, slid into a digression on shoes, then into one on the feet of little girls, and then into little girls altogether. In *Fors* he was capable of moving from the Elgin marbles to plum pudding.) It was this exhaustible fund of essences and events that became Proust's inspiration: his liberation. He had at first considered translating Emerson (who turns up in *A la recherche* as the favorite author of one of St.-Loup's stage-door girlfriends) and Proust's spiritual tutor would have been even more unlikely than the one we have to contemplate. Professor Macksey shows us that we can discern Ruskin in Elstir, Vinteuil, Bergotte, and the narrator himself. Especially himself.

Both Ruskin and Proust chose to place their erotic experience in impossibilities involving permanently deferred consummation; both declined, after awhile, to inhabit the societies to which they belonged, and became hermits in surroundings totally under their own control. Neither was completely aware that he was the chronicler of the death of the western city as our only unit of civilization, though both were aware that they were chronicling the death of a culture into which they had been born. If Ruskin could have had Proust's sense of humor, the world could not have driven him mad from time to time; if Proust had had Ruskin's stamina and restless mobility, he could have lived to finish *A la recherche* with the degree of polish and completeness he longed for.

This small book is not a little one. It is, in Ruskin's phrase, a king's treasure; it contains a world. Neither Ruskin nor Proust can be read up; they are best when read a second or third time, when the resonances become richer and richer. And for those who have not had Amiens explained to them by Ruskin, or Ruskin by Proust, it is a book promising great adventures of the imagination.

The critic as storyteller

Richard Ellmann Four Dubliners.
George Braziller, 122 pages, $12.95

reviewed by William H. Pritchard

This short book by the late Richard Ellmann consists of four essays, on Wilde, Yeats, Joyce, and Beckett. Delivered first as lectures at the Library of Congress between 1982 and 1985, they were subsequently published as pamphlets by the Library, and also appeared in *The New York Review of Books*;

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now, with Braziller's assistance, they have been turned into a handsome book, written with the elegance and authority we have grown familiar with in Ellmann's work over the years. Here I have in mind not so much his major work—the Joyce biography—or his early books on Yeats, but the rather more modest collections of related essays on writers: *Eminent Domain* (1967), which traced Yeats's affiliations with such contemporaries as Wilde, Joyce, Pound, Eliot, and Auden; and *Golden Codgers* (1973), a collection of "biographical speculations" (as its subtitle noted) on some late nineteenth-century and modern writers prefaced by a discussion of literary biography, something Ellmann knew a lot about.

What holds the Dubliners essays together, at the level of content or argument, is a focus not merely on the four men's genius for living with contradictions (Wilde's oscillations between Catholicism and atheism, Ruskin and Pater, hetero- and homosexuality; Yeats's hunger for both beatific visions and their obverse, his war between soul and body), but also on their success in writing books out of these contradictions. Joyce, Ellmann cleverly suggests, prided himself on not growing up, on not "developing" as a writer (Wilde once said, in a remark not quoted here, that only mediocrities develop). "If I had matured, I wouldn't be so committed to the *folie* of writing Work in Progress," Joyce announced in a remark that both invites us to think of *Finnegans Wake* as a folly and scorns us if we so dare. As for Beckett (and also for Wilde), "It was as if every statement, like every proclivity, contained its own contradiction." Acknowledgment of this truth is seen in the way Beckett takes one of the novelist's traditional allegiances, the allegiance to rendering minute particulars, and makes those particulars very minute and unennobling indeed—like sucking stones, farts, or (my own favorite) Murphy's biscuits, so unfeelingly devoured by Miss Dew's dachshund.

Ellmann has always been an excellent storyteller, a talent not widely distributed among professors of literature, and he begins the discussion of Yeats by telling the story of what Yeats called his "second puberty"—the renewed sexual vigor he thought had been induced in him by the Steinach operation he underwent in 1934. Whatever its effects on his sexual performance (on the basis of testimony from persons involved, Ellmann is skeptical that there were any), the potency of Yeats's late verse and plays is undeniable, as the "wild old wicked man" proceeded to call things by their right—or at least low-down—names. Yet as Ellmann points out near the end of the chapter, this impulse to simplify, "the urge to have done with fine distinctions, subtle passions, and differentiated matter," contended—fruitfully for Yeats's art—with an opposing urge "to keep them at all costs." Here "The Circus Animals' Desertion" is a key text, though the essay's account of the poem is too brief.

Joyce, who in his biographer's terms "was at once dependent on the real and superior to it," is considered (by way of illuminating the composition of *Ulysses*) through stories of his sexual approaches and proposals to two women. One of them, Dr. Gertrud Kaempffer, he met in Locarno while she was recovering from tuberculosis; the other, a young woman named Marthe Fleischmann, was afflicted with a limp that, like Dr. Kaempffer's first name, would later be bestowed on Gerty MacDowell, the creature of Mr. Bloom's fantasies in the "Nausicaa" chapter in *Ulysses*. Both women declined to gratify Joyce's wishes; but despite the practical failure, the experience, like Yeats's Steinach operation, helped quicken the writer's sense of life, providing new energies for his art. In the case of Beckett, effects of "life" were obtained by wringing the neck of eloquence, of language itself—which operation brought, in Ellmann's good phrase, an "unexpected sumptuousness":

> He used hard words that have to be looked up and then turn out to be marvelously apposite; he will not allow chichés or stock phrases to pass as dead matter; his sentences may describe faltering, but they themselves stand up under

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> inspection; as if to counter the dying fall of his characters, his language undergoes a tremendous revivification.

Thus—to quote three of my favorite Beckettian revivifications, all from *Murphy*—we are told that "it was like looking for a needle in a haystack full of vipers"; or that "Cooper never sat, his acathisia was deep-seated and of long standing"; or that "he always used [this gesture] when words were inadequate to conceal what he felt." These sentences not only stand up, but bristle under inspection.

The passage quoted above from Ellmann does not point out anything new about Beckett, nor does it redirect our attention toward aspects of him hitherto overlooked. This is true of the other portraits as well. His concern is not mainly to say fresh things about the Dubliners' genius with language. He does not propose "interpretations," does not have a particular hobbyhorse to ride. He does not argue with other critics, nor is he interested in revaluations, in promoting any one writer at the expense of another, or in making discriminations of value within the individual oeuvre of each. And the argument proposed by *Four Dubliners* is minimal. Yet for a short book it is full of good gossip that only Joyce or Wilde specialists—and surely not all of those—will have run across before. Ellmann moves suavely, and without ever raising his voice, from an assertion about the particular writer to humorously illustrative evidence of the point proposed, as in the following sequence about Joyce:

> When Joyce was young so many subjects pressed urgently upon him that he had only to choose among them. As he grew older he needed more hints. He sometimes thought he must alter his quiet life so as to secure them. Of course he could say defensively to Djuna Barnes, "[Johann Sebastian] Bach led a very uneventful life," but when he was with Ernest Hemingway he discussed the possibility of going to Africa. Mrs. Joyce encouraged him: "Jim can do with a spot of lion hunting," she said. "The thing we must face," said Joyce, whose sight was bad, "is that I couldn't see the lion." His wife was not to be silenced: "Hemingway'd describe him to you and afterwards you could go up to him and touch him and smell him. That's all you'd need."

As with other moments in Ellmann's seamless narrative, the bit about Joyce and the lion is so good (too good perhaps—did Nora Joyce actually say "a *spot* of lion hunting"?) as to overwhelm the point about the quiet vs. active life it is presumed to illustrate. We remember that the biographer of Joyce was among other things—perhaps above all—very entertaining.

At the same time, there seems to be something about Ellmann's approach to writers and writing that keeps his criticism from being of the first rank. I hesitate to say that because he writes in such a lucid, approachable way what he says about individual writers is not quite "difficult" enough, is a little too quickly accessible: surely one doesn't want to encourage the sort of hard-think opacity that has become the stock-in-trade of many critics—or at least academics—today.[1] But there may be something too urbane about certain of Ellmann's sentences. Consider the following ones on Wilde:

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1 Consider the following, from Frederic Jameson's foreword to a collection of Greimas's writings on semiotics: "Indeed, we have reached a paradoxical moment in the development of this particular semiotics (there are of course many other kinds), in which, some twenty years after the inaugural texts of a kind of research sometimes denounced as ahistorical and universalizing in some bourgeois analytic scientifistic fashion, has now begun not merely to reflect on its own history but also and above all to discover the deeper historicity of its own inner logic of development and of the dynamic whereby a local concept, modified at its saturation point and at the moment of diminishing returns, in its turn proves to demand the enlargement and subsequent modification of the entire conceptual field of which it was a part." (From *On Meaning: Selected Writings in Semiotic Theory*; University of Minnesota Press, 1987.)

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> He could see that aestheticism was going out as much as it was coming in; though he adopted many of its interests, such as tints and textures, he did so always with something of his mother's high-spiritedness, which, while excessive, poked fun at its own excess. It was in this tone that he made his famous remark, "I find it hard and harder to live up to my blue china." Four years later *Punch* would fix on this as part of its campaign against aestheticism, but Wilde had obviously said it with some self-mockery. Still, to live up to one's blue china is not so absurd as it may sound—we have all much to learn from our bricabrac.

This would be a nice moment in a lecture, and if I were delivering that last sentence I would give my audience some sort of look, just as I came out with "we have all much to learn from our bricabrac," spoken in exactly the right tone, whatever that might be. But I'm not sure it goes much deeper than that; at least upon reflection I seem to have not much to learn from my bricabrac. The point is that, in a typical sequence of Ellmann's sentences, there's really nothing for the reader to do but smile knowingly and assent. It may be that, except in the rarest cases, one cannot be both a masterly biographer and a critic of equal value. Whether or not that is so, Ellmann's books on Yeats, and his books on Joyce written after the biography, have made little difference in the way I read those writers. (In this connection, Hugh Kenner's *Joyce's Voices,* itself a short book, does more to stimulate thought about Joyce's narrative style and rhetorical procedures than do Ellmann's combined pages about the writer.) Yet only a churlish or obsessed reader will find things to disagree with in *Four Dubliners.* The sentences lock into one another so beautifully, the voice speaks so calmly, engagingly, authoritatively, that an almost hermetically sealed world is the result—one would not know how to get hold of things so as to question and disturb them. Ellmann himself seldom if ever poses a question to which he doesn't know the answer, so there is nothing to interfere with the flow of his commentary.

These last remarks about a critical style should not be taken as demeaning it, or as disparaging the loss of a gifted, industrious, and wonderfully good-humored writer. We may be grateful that, in a labor which may justly be called heroic, since he knew he was fatally ill, Ellmann managed to complete the biography of Wilde he had been long at work on. *Four Dubliners* then may serve as the appetizer to what will be a very substantial main course.

No way out

Margaret Drabble The Radiant Way. Knopf, 432 pages, $18.95

reviewed by Donna Rifkind

Margaret Drabble has been writing novels for about twenty-five years, and she has produced enough work to prove beyond doubt that she is a smart and talented writer. This said, it must be acknowledged that her novels, read together, are rather a tedious lot. Her protagonists practice different professions, are of different ages and temperaments, respond differently to their circumstances. But her novels suffer from a constraining sameness which keeps Drabble as a writer wandering around the same circle, treading the same ground. The fact has been clear and becomes clearer with the publication of her newest effort, *The Radiant Way*: Margaret Drabble stays where she is as a novelist because she has no place else to go.

The Radiant Way shares with Drabble's other fiction a central ambivalence toward her London world: on one hand, she echoes the ingrained, tiresome notion that modern life in England is an industrialized nightmare, breeding a universally crushing despair. On the other, her characters manage to live quite nicely in this allegedly doomed society. Their houses are comfortable, their children go to good schools, they themselves have enjoyed fine educations, and their pocketbooks, if not overflowing, have enough money in them to allow them to

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keep their lunch appointments in good restaurants. It is hard to imagine that such malaise and such ease could co-exist so companionably within these characters.

The novel opens at a New Year's Eve party as the 1980s begin. Liz Headleand, a forty-five-year-old psychotherapist, is hosting the party with her husband Charles, a television producer, in their large house on Harley Street. Among the two hundred people invited are Alix Bowen and Esther Breuer, Liz's best friends since all three met at Cambridge in 1952. Alix, a socialist and a "sentimentalist about class," teaches English literature to prison girls; Esther is an art historian specializing in the Quattrocento.

Drabble draws these three main characters with an uneven hand. When Liz's husband announces he wants to divorce Liz to marry an aristocratic bore, Alix and Esther react with "a critical curiosity that was not entirely comfortable or comforting," finding "something almost satisfactory in watching her plunge and flounder and skitter off course." Elsewhere, however, these two seemingly coldhearted women show an unexplained excess of sentimentality; in several slightly absurd scenes, Esther fusses maternally over a potted palm. Esther, as a matter of fact, is an entirely disappointing character. Drabble wants us to believe that Esther has pared down her life so that she gets by with only the most necessary human attachments, that she wants little from life and offers little of herself to anyone. What we feel as a result, however, is that Drabble does not seem to care much about Esther and has therefore emptied her of most sympathetic qualities. The author is much more successful in presenting the messy vitality of a less central character, Liz's sister, a housewife in the dreary northern town where she and Liz were raised.

If Esther is a difficult character to believe in, an even more problematic case is Alix's husband, Brian. Brian is a man of lower-class origins who has become too bourgeois to be able to write the great working-class novel that once burned in him. He now spends his time teaching at a local college and fretting over various union strikes around the country. Although he occupies an important position in the novel, Brian is so sketchy that we are unable to form an opinion of him; we glimpse him usually only when someone else speaks of him, or when Drabble, in a sociological mood, provides a few facts about his past.

Brian fails to come alive as a character for a more significant reason than Esther, who is merely a victim of the author's apparent apathy toward her. Brian fails because, although his interests are almost exclusively political, Drabble appears to have no sympathy at all for his struggle over the issues with which he is preoccupied. Except for a faintly cynical attitude toward progress and idealism, Drabble's tone toward Brian and toward her other characters is almost maddeningly dispassionate. "Alix and Brian," she writes serenely, "good socialists though they try to be, own or at least are paying a mortgage on their house in Wandsworth. It is, of course, a fairly horrible house, which mitigates in their favour, morally." As Drabble shows herself to be aware, Brian's habit of pursuing a comfortable life while rejecting the society that makes this life possible (he is teaching Dickens's *Hard Times* to his university students while showing strong support for a steelworker's strike in the north) is a deeply hypocritical position. It is a position that has the potential for comedy, but this novel bears no trace of comedy, nor of tragedy, nor indeed of anything but Drabble's willful neutrality. This is not apathy on her part, but a deliberate refusal to do anything with her own understanding of this contradiction, and it paralyzes her ability to provide her characters with sufficient depth, and nearly everything in her fiction suffers as a result. I am not arguing here that Drabble ought to have written a novel seething with political biases. It is important, however, that a book so full of ideological conflicts should make us feel strongly about the characters who worry over these conflicts. Drabble is unwilling to do anything more than report on the situation and then retreat.

As a result, there is a patchwork quality to

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the narrative as it shifts from one character's preoccupations to another's, with no one event or idea given pre-eminence over the others. Liz puts her life together after Charles leaves and buys a cute little house in Kentish Town. Charles moves to New York and begins to be disappointed with his life, sinking into nostalgia for his past acclaim as a producer. He was responsible for an award-winning documentary about education in the 1960s called, after a children's primer, *The Radiant Way,* and he mourns the loss of the youthful idealism that prompted him to mount the program. Again, as with Brian, we are robbed of a complete understanding of Charles by Drabble's flat presentation of his unease.

The most dramatic of the book's situations arrives after a good deal of preparation, but it nevertheless seems rather disconnected. Jilly Fox, one of Alix's more menacing prison students, is found murdered, her severed head resting on the front seat of Alix's car. Among the various warnings Drabble provides for this scene are Esther's dreams of decapitated heads, newspaper reports of a crazed killer of women on lonely streets, and Alix's extra-sensory fears for Jilly's safety. Despite the many portents, however, and despite the grisliness of the murder, this scene does not occupy a particularly key place in the narrative, nor is it meant to bear any significant thematic freight. One gets the sense that Drabble provided it because she felt required to come up with a melodrama to rescue the book from her own monotonous neutrality as a narrator.

Other elements in *The Radiant Way* make it a typical Drabble production. One is her habit of inserting the names of minor characters who have served as protagonists in her previous books. Charles's colleague Gabriel Denham, for example, was a major figure in her novel *Jerusalem the Golden* (1967). In that book, Gabriel pursues an extramarital affair with a young girl because his own stylish wife, Phillipa, has been overcome by an unnameable, unbeatable despair. Phillipa is in many ways the prototypical Drabble character: she weeps and weeps, in restaurants, in stores, in cars, for the incomprehensible tragedy of her life, all the while dressing in fabulously fashionable clothes, going to cocktail parties, and benefiting from all the other advantages of Gabriel's handsome salary. And the reader, whether baffled by Phillipa or eager to be responsive to Charles and Brian, is not given license to be engaged by any of these characters.

Also evident throughout Drabble's work is her excessive literariness. A Cambridge graduate, she served as editor of the *Oxford Companion to English Literature* from 1980 to 1985, and signs of her dependence on literature are everywhere apparent. Throughout *The Radiant Way* are references to Mishima and Maugham, Hardy and Orwell, Angus Wilson and Edmund Blunden; there are few Drabble novels wherein a character is not reading something by Iris Murdoch. Brian, as noted, is teaching *Hard Times* to his students, and Alix reads Blake to her prison girls.

The best parts of the book are those in which Drabble stops neutrally narrating, drops the balanced, overtly literary presentation, and writes, as the cliché goes, from the heart. The scenes where Liz and her sister struggle with their guilt over ignoring the needs of their dying mother, for example, work fairly well. But there are not enough of such passages, and the gloppy, transcendental ending ("The sun bleeds, the earth bleeds. The sun stands still") does not make up for their marginality. Drabble spends most of her pages chronicling what in *The Middle Ground* she described as "the tatty diversities of tatty distracting modern life." Yet these diversities do not seem quite as tatty as Drabble would have us believe, and her insistence that the British way of life is less than radiant adds up to a wearisome piece of novel-writing. If this is all there is, why take such cautious, precious care to get it all down? Surely there *is* more to contemporary British life than a list of well-digested complaints about quotidian existence, with a few murders and infidelities thrown in for

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variety. One goes to a newspaper morgue for recitations like this, not to a novel.

More serious, however, is Drabble's refusal adequately to confront the contradictions of modern life that she outlines so carefully throughout her books. She makes sure that she meets certain ideological goals in her narrations—vaguely leftist sentiments are always somewhere in the air—yet goes out of her way to prove that she does not wholly accept that ideology by producing in her tone a slightly sarcastic distaste for it. But since one cannot possibly believe that this hint of sarcasm constitutes a criticism of any sort, one finds Drabble retreating into an antiseptic, passionless narration that destroys any imaginative power her books might otherwise have had. One wonders how long a writer can go on rehearsing these evasions in novel after novel—and how long readers can continue to be interested in that writer's constant bumping up against a dead end.

Who was Paul Morand?

Paul Morand Fancy Goods/Open All Night. Preface by Marcel Proust. Translated by Ezra Pound. New Directions, 151 pages, $16

reviewed by Renee Winegarten

We do not hear much about Paul Morand at present. Yet between 1921 and 1939 he figured among the leading writers of the day in France. What happened and why? He was the elegant and eloquent spokesman of an age that he and many of his contemporaries believed to be thoroughly rotten, although he somehow excluded himself from the general disintegration. The part played by the myth of decadence (countermyth to that of progress) is central to an understanding of the exemplary fate of Morand.

The assiduous reader of Proust's *roman-fleuve* may well have noted the passing allusion to "charming Morand, the delightful author of 'Clarisse,'" in *Le Temps retrouvé*. Word of Morand's admiration had reached Proust and, late one night in 1915 or 1916, the invalid recluse paid a surprise visit to the young diplomat. Morand soon found himself dining in Proust's company at the Ritz, as the guest of the ambitious Greco-Romanian Princess Hélène Soutzo (later his wife), who resided there. In response to Morand's "Ode to Marcel Proust," the creator of Swann penned an essay entitled "For a friend: remarks on style." This was published as the preface to Morand's first collection of short stories, *Tendres Stocks* (1921). Amid the flowery compliments, Proust criticized the budding author's imagery which (as he told a correspondent) he found over-elaborate and artificial.

Still, Paul Morand was launched. Readers thought there was something essentially "modern" about his quirky, lightly detached observation of women in the three stories of *Tendres Stocks*. Besides, there was the (then) intriguingly modish title: the juxtaposition of an adjective long associated with love and a noun of English origin that evoked material objects. Ezra Pound's translation of the title as *Fancy Goods* misses the suggestion of amorousness, the accumulation of fond memories of women Morand had known before and during the 1914-18 War. What seemed particularly new was the way in which his human beings failed to make real contact, a certain tough lack of feeling, an amoral stance that looked both sophisticated and disillusioned. The adjectives "charming" and "delightful" which Proust applied to Morand are not, perhaps, the first that now come to mind when considering this prolific author of stories, travel books, and novels.

Born in 1888, Paul Morand was brought up in a cultivated circle. His father, Eugène Morand, was a *fin de siècle* playwright, painter, and artistic functionary who numbered among his eminent friends composers like Massenet as well as the mighty sculptor Rodin. Eugène Morand also knew Oscar Wilde, whose funeral in exile he attended. Although the elder Morand sided with those who maintained the innocence of Captain

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Dreyfus, his home (so his son would relate) was firmly closed to Jews. Paul Morand's childhood and youth were profoundly influenced by *fin de siècle* attitudes, including the concept of art for art's sake, linked as ever with a deep pessimism. This pessimism was reinforced by his father's very French injunction to "be distrustful," and by the myth of decline and decadence (confirmed by his reading of Nietzsche) to which the author of *Tendres Stocks* subscribed throughout his life.

Things English were all the rage in the period of the *entente cordiale*. Young Morand was sent to study in England. At the suggestion of Lord Alfred Douglas, Wilde's sinister companion, he spent a year at Oxford. Appointed attaché at the French embassy in London in 1913, when in his mid-twenties, Morand was taken up by high society in its last rich glow before the lights went out in Europe. He knew everyone who was anyone, from the witty orchestral conductor Thomas Beecham and the ill-fated sculptor Gaudier-Brzeska to Winston Churchill.

During the 1914-18 War, Morand managed to avoid the trenches. After prewar military service, he had been placed on the reserve, and he remained at the disposition of the Minister of Foreign Affairs. He accepted his fate with stoicism. In 1918, when France had lost so many men, this noted sportsman failed his medical examination, it is thought due to the efforts of Princess Soutzo. From his *Journal d'un attaché d'ambassade 1916-17* (published in 1948), it is plain that he sympathized with Joseph Caillaux, proponent of a separate peace with Germany. He also revealed there a deep admiration for Philippe Pétain, "the hero of Verdun, the anti-parliamentarian, the only man to understand modern warfare." In his diary Morand recorded the need for "a strong man" if France were not to follow the path of Russia in 1917. It is ironic that his bitter loathing for the "French gerontocracy" did not stand him in good stead in later years.

Notwithstanding the bloodletting at the front, for some privileged individuals social life continued much as before in Paris, with dinners at expensive restaurants and visits to the theater. Parties were held at Morand's apartment in the Palais-Royal. He had met the effervescent Jean Cocteau, and was present at the notorious premiere of his ballet *Parade* in 1917, with music by Satie and designs by Picasso. After the end of the war, Morand continued to participate in the celebrated "Saturday dinners" whose guests would include Cocteau and his circle of noted composers, artists, writers—the jazzy milieu of *Le Boeuf sur le toit*. Morand himself soon came to be regarded as one of the leading representatives of the frenetic postwar era.

Ezra Pound, who moved to Paris in 1920, set about translating *Tendres Stocks* and its successor, *Ouvert la Nuit,* in his customary, controversially free manner, possibly sensing a fellow imagist in their highly chic author. Surprisingly, Morand's introduction to *Ouvert la Nuit,* where he ironically compared himself to a wandering Jew "arriving in a neat and tidy nation with that ghastly reek of people who have travelled all night," was omitted. Pound could well have found a fellow spirit in Morand's snide allusions to the unpleasant Montjoye (real name Aronsohn) in the story "Aurore," and similar niceties elsewhere. Morand's friendship with Proust supplied no prophylactic: he had already noted in his diary Proust's "complex" for telling anti-Semitic stories.

With *Ouvert la Nuit,* Morand tends to reinforce preconceptions about supposed national characteristics. In "La Nuit Catalane," for instance, the narrator believes that he is pursuing an affair with proud Doña Remedios, while she is intent on her task as a terrorist. This tale derives from the author's acquaintance with Soledad Villafranca, erstwhile companion of the executed Catalan anarchist Francisco Ferrer. The typical Morandian narrator's stance, as temporary participant and curious observer who expresses no judgment, becomes wearisomely smart. Morand's work ultimately conveys not just a failure of humane sympathy but a political outlook that posits the collapse of Western civilization into chaos. Its Speng-

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lerian tendency indicates an anarchism of the Right that characteristically betrays a nostalgia for authority and order.

From 1925, when Morand was appointed to the French legation in Bangkok, he would seize every opportunity for travel. His books on his journeys—in the Orient, in North and South America, in Africa—eschewed romantic exoticism. From afar, Europe appeared "egotistical, democratic, divided." The author's distaste for democracy was manifest. The world was entering upon "the foul age of the half-caste," he wrote, much influenced by the racial theories of Gobineau and his disciples. No sooner had he returned from one journey than he was off on another, restlessly in quest of new impressions and sensations, the self-confessed "man in a hurry," the typical "haunted traveller" of the interwar years. Travel was then still largely an adventure for the well-to-do, as it had been for Morand's admired friend, the wealthy Anglophile writer Valery Larbaud. Marriage to Princess Soutzo, daughter of a merchant banker, enabled Morand to indulge further his fondness not only for travel, but for fast cars, horses, and women.

It was through his work in the cinema that he met an eighteen-year-old actress, Josette Day, later the unforgettable Belle in Cocteau's film *La Belle et la Bête,* who became his mistress and protégée. He had been commissioned to help write the script for Pabst's film *Don Quixote,* with Chaliapin in the leading role. Morand was not favorably impressed by the world of the cinema. His involvement with it coincided with the influx of refugees from Nazi Germany. In his satire *France la Doulce* (with significantly antique spelling) he directed his venom at "pirates whether naturalized or not," that is, Jews. Morand graciously said that his depiction of this "scum" had nothing to do with the great international artists of the cinema who were welcome in France—as if that excused his xenophobic diatribe.

The fact was that by October 1933 Morand had already ventured to reveal his hand in an editorial written for the first

Harvey Quaytman

New Paintings

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number of a new weekly edited by Henri Massis, longstanding friend of the Action Française. Here, the self-indulgent egotist and womanizer called for drastic measures and an end to immorality: "At this time, every country except ours is killing its vermin . . . . Don't let us leave Hitler to pride himself on being the only person to undertake the moral rehabilitation of the West." If more French blood was to be spilt "we want clean corpses," he added. The phrase became notorious.

In August 1939, shortly before the outbreak of war, Morand was sent to London as head of the French mission concerned with economic warfare. He was thus eminently well placed to join General de Gaulle when France fell in June 1940. Instead, he suddenly decided to desert his post, and he made his way to Vichy. He had seen a vision of the end of a world (yet again) and of the imminent collapse of England.

Various reasons have been adduced for his return to France, including a liaison with a married Frenchwoman who had recently borne his child. But in reality his entire outlook, his longtime admiration for Pétain, his friendship with the Comtesse de Chambrun (Laval's daughter), made him an obvious adherent of the Vichy regime. Like so many of his countrymen, he thought that nothing could prevent German hegemony; and in any case (as he wrote in an article of 1941) he admired the patriotism, the vitality, the [Nietzschean] "tragic and Dionysian feeling of life" displayed by the Nazi invaders when compared with the hedonism and weakness of the French. The irony of his condemnation of French hedonism appears to have escaped him.

Morand swore allegiance to Pétain, lunched frequently with Laval, and was made head of film censorship (though he soon resigned). He moved easily between Vichy and Occupied Paris, where his notoriously anti-Semitic and pro-German wife welcomed in her salon Hitler's favorite sculptor, Arno Breker, as well as the equivocal author of *On the Marble Cliffs,* Ernst Jünger, whom the couple invited to Maxim's. In 1943, Morand was named Vichy's ambassador to Romania, where he did not distinguish himself. Not only did he engage in financial transactions to his own advantage, he also ransacked the embassy in order to confiscate a two-way radio that had enabled members of his staff to communicate with London. When the air raids intensified in the spring of 1944, he fled from Bucharest, leaving behind only a skeleton staff. This was some months before he was appointed ambassador to Bern. He and his wife prudently remained in Switzerland after the war.

Charged with collaboration, he was sacked with the loss of his pension rights. Otherwise, no action was taken against him. His supposed "penury" was not excessive. A good few years were spent in the "wilderness": in a château in Switzerland; a house in Tangiers; a suite at the Crillon; and later, in his wife's Parisian mansion with the booty from his travels (a residence compared by one visitor to that of Citizen Kane). Then, after a period in purgatory, he was "discovered" and taken up by the so-called "Hussars," new anarchists of the Right like the novelist Roger Nimier and his friends. Having sought election to the Académie Française in 1936 and 1941, he ventured to renew his candidacy in 1958 to loud objections about his wartime conduct and President de Gaulle's veto. He was elected at last in 1968, although de Gaulle declined to receive the new immortal at the Elysée Palace in the time-honored manner.

Morand's tone in the latter part of his life (he died in 1976) was one of pained indignation and scorn for the modern world. He spoke loftily of his love of lost causes and of "everything that comes to an end," stressing his single-minded apolitical devotion to Art. There was no reassessment, no expression of regret. He liked to portray his own misfortunes through those of the luckless Fouquet, Louis XIV's disgraced Finance Minister (who actually spent nineteen years in solitary confinement in a grim dungeon). In interviews, he contrived to elude the subject of

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his behavior during the War. True, he and his wife had intervened with varying success on behalf of a few well-known Jewish acquaintances, doubtless enjoying a rare sense of power. With characteristic insouciance, he could write to Roger Nimier about Brittany in summer as "a concentration camp for tourists." A Proustian snob and salon Nietzschean, apparently he remained careless of the bitter suffering of so many ordinary human beings under totalitarianism.

Pierre Drieu La Rochelle, the fascist writer and collaborator, who was himself obsessed with decline, had already noted (in 1928) how widespread was the idea of decadence in his day. And he remarked then on the "strikingly disillusioned judgment on the worth of our civilization which appears on every page" of Morand's work. There is doubtless a depressing book to be written on the deleterious effect of the theme of decadence in twentieth-century French literature. There is also a warning to be drawn from Morand's writings and destiny about the consequences of failing to acknowledge what is truly valuable and life-enhancing in our culture.

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Notebook

Talk shows at the Met

by Eric Gibson

Why would anyone want to pay twenty dollars to hear Walter Cronkite talk about Poussin's *Rape of the Sabine Women,* Beverly Sills speak on Caravaggio's *The Musicians,* or Steve Martin discourse on Goya's *The Bullfight?* Not, surely for the same reasons people once tuned in to Kenneth Clark and *Civilisation.* Yet this is just what visitors to the Metropolitan Museum can now do by subscribing to one of its "AT&T Portfolio Tours," the new recorded tours of the museum's permanent collection.[1]

The incongruity of eliciting these celebrities as guides to the Metropolitan's collection must be woefully self-evident to anyone outside the field of public relations. Beverly Sills is an opera singer, as far removed from paintings and sculptures as Philippe de Montebello, the director of the Metropolitan, is from arias and recitatives. Walter Cronkite, as everyone knows, is a television journalist, last seen reporting on the America's Cup yacht race; and Steve Martin, *Saturday Night Live*'s "wild and crazy guy," is an actor and comedian. (Although it is true that Mr. Martin collects art, one can't help remembering Annie Liebowitz's portrait of him posed theatrically in front of a Franz Kline painting, swaths of black paint smeared across his white tie and tails.) Clearly the appeal of these people lies solely in their value as celebrities capable of attracting museum visitors on the basis of media sparkle.

It is not hard to determine how this ghastly new version of museum marketing has come about. For several years now the Metropolitan and other museums have made extraordinary efforts to persuade people with virtually no serious interest in art to come to their museums on the occasion of "blockbuster" exhibitions. And the people have come, in droves. But it seems that when the blockbuster is over, not enough people have returned. Museums have come to be regarded as houses of entertainment—as theaters of a sort—worth visiting only when the latest "show" is "playing," but thought to be dark and empty at other times. The task, then, for the Metropolitan and other museums, has been to stimulate more frequent visits. And since these days the public can't be trusted to respond with the proper Pavlovian alacrity to any invitation that doesn't come with the right amount of flash, a strategy has been devised to make it seem as though seeing great art is as much fun as watching a movie star on a talk show.

With the "AT&T Portfolio Tours," we have moved into new heights of glitz and slick marketing as the museum experience is transformed into a phenomenon of pop culture. At bottom what's being offered isn't

1 Given the choice of narrators, the titles of the tapes are fairly predictable. Miss Sills hosts "Music in Art," Mr. Cronkite "Historic Moments in Art," and Mr. Martin "Animals in Art." Philippe de Montebello, the museum's director, makes an appearance as well, with "Masterpieces of the Met."

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aesthetic adventure at all, but the ultimate pop culture fix: a one-on-one audience with a celebrity. After all, once that tape is running and the voice is softly droning in one's ear, who can tell whether the sound is reality or illusion? The inevitable result is to move the work of art into the background. Not only does the public come to the museum in order to "see" Walter Cronkite, Beverly Sills, and Steve Martin rather than, say, a van Eyck, but the premium on personality ensures that, in a sense, we see van Eyck "through" Walter Cronkite, a very bizarre and unhealthy state of affairs.

To be sure, we all need to know what we're looking at in a museum, but there's a thin line between too little and too much information, and between the right and wrong kinds. In general, the museum's desire to inform its visitors needs to be balanced against the more compelling need to allow the work of art to speak for itself, not all at once, which it will never do, but over time. The desire to "educate" visitors—which began with bare-bones labels, grew to docents and longer labels, and now, at the Met at least, embraces all that and more: a guidebook, three types of recorded tours, and an "Education Center"—panders to a perception among the public that a work of art contains an idea, generally only one, to "get," some secret buried in the picture inaccessible to the naked eye.

Yet far from being limited to "getting," or finite in any other way, the experience of looking is endlessly open-ended. The excitement one feels before a work of art isn't brought about by a neatly packaged set of facts. It lies chiefly in one's own process of discovery, in what one, alone, sees of technique, composition, inspiration, interpretation—insights ranging from the most superficial to the most profound. Only by this act of slow, repeated scrutiny, with all that it entails in terms of self-effacement, can the necessary connection with the work of art be established, the connection through which meaning becomes accessible and the work of art, in some measure, one's own. And it goes without saying that this experience is only attainable in an environment that fosters the maximum of concentration while permitting the minimum of distraction. By substituting something impersonal and ready-made for that process of involved inquiry, the museum deprives the work of art of its complexity and depth. Instead, it becomes a species of illustration, one more image in which the viewer has little investment. The museum experience then becomes akin to idly leafing through a magazine instead of, as it is ideally, getting involved in a conversation you can't tear yourself away from. In such a climate it is no wonder that an entire generation of artists exists whose careers are based on the premise that images—works of art especially—have lost their power to affect us.

And let's be in no doubt as to exactly whom the museum is aiming at with these tours. At twenty dollars, each one, although it includes admission, is more than twice the eight dollars one pays for the cheapest seat at the New York City Opera. And while the proceeds go to the museum, AT&T having underwritten the entire cost of production, that price turns visiting the museum into an outing the average person has to schedule in advance and budget for. The tours, then, aren't the product of any magnanimous, democratic impulse on the part of the museum. Rather, this popularization of art constitutes a shrewd marketing ploy directed at the most besieged constituency in non-profit fundraising: the young, well-educated graduates of business and law schools who last heard of art in their college survey courses but whose incomes allow them to dally with it now that it is suddenly trendy.

Even without the appeal to celebrity, however, the "AT&T Portfolio Tours" would have to be judged a failure. Taped guides to art are counterproductive in any form. But the new tapes are even more superficial than the tapes the Met already had, which the museum has been offering for years with faceless narrators and little fanfare. Focusing on periods rather than themes, the earlier versions at least occasionally offer informa-

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tion one can use. Thus, on the museum's Impressionism tape, one learns of Manet's *Woman With a Parrot* that the dispersal of focus—the model's face competes for our attention with her dress, the parrot, and so on—was considered unconventional and even shocking in its day, and that it was this artist who began the simplification and flattening of forms so characteristic of modern art. With observations like these, one could easily stop the tape and get all the way to Pollock without feeling adrift.

Unfortunately, the new tapes achieve no such salutary ends. One can't get any particularly useful morsel of information because the thematic cast of each tour works against it. The disparate works of art come across as a slide lecture gone out of control, or as one of those grueling vacations offering a dozen cities in three days. Worse still, in order to fit into its thematic category, every work of art is reduced to its subject, making what we are told about each piece so incomplete as to amount to nothing. Exekias and Rosa Bonheur begin and end as artists who use horses as models, for example.

With their emphasis on rare and precious objects, the blockbuster exhibitions forged in the minds of the public a deleterious equivalence between art and money. The Metropolitan's new view of art as nothing more than a carrier of narrative effects creates an equally corrupting association between art and entertainment. After all, if the whole museum experience boils down to storytelling, then what's to separate *Washington Crossing the Delaware* from *Platoon*? For it goes without saying that in this scenario, the aesthetic dimension, which is what one comes to a museum for anyway, is all but totally sacrificed. Style, the meat of art history and the chief means by which the artist speaks to us, disappears. Walter Cronkite may use the word "neoclassical" in his discourse on David's *The Death of Socrates,* but for all the explanation he gives, the word might as well refer to a country. When he later speaks about Meissonier's *Friedland, 1807* and Bastien-Lepage's *Joan of Arc,* he seems to be referring to historical documents and not paintings from the deadest part of the academic tradition. What all this means is that the "AT&T Portfolio Tours" are going to leave the state of public understanding pretty much as it was before. Subscribers may leave the Metropolitan knowing what they like, but they're not going to know much about art.

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Letters

The academy vs. the canon

To the Editors:

In his remarks on the Yale Whitney Center symposium on literary theory and the curriculum ("The Academy Debates the Canon," September 1987), Roger Kimball favorably quotes my observation that one of the panelists, Margaret Ferguson, had failed to address the question of "what she proposed to do with the many people in the academy who happened not to agree with her." "Nor was anyone" at the symposium going to address that question, says Kimball.

Since Kimball seems to have thought my question such a good one, I was surprised that he too avoided addressing it. What, I wonder, does Kimball recommend be done about those of us professors of literature whose leftist "cynicism" and "devotion to shallow intellectual fashion" fill him with so much disgust? Exactly what kind of institutional action does Kimball want?

I thought I offered a realistic approach in my symposium paper when I argued (in Kimball's paraphrase) that "we don't need a consensus . . . to carry on work in the academy; we can agree to disagree." I suggested that teaching situations might be arranged to foreground philosophical and ideological differences that now go unperceived by students. My point was that, in a situation where consensus on educational goals is hard to come by, it would be sensible to look for ways to bring the disagreements and conflicts over these and other issues themselves into the curriculum where something educationally constructive could be made out of them. Kimball, however, dismisses this suggestion as "a prescription for confusion, guaranteed to muddle young minds."

It would be interesting to ask some of the "young minds" themselves if they think they need to be protected from exposure to philosophical and ideological conflicts. As I argued in the paper, if anything is "guaranteed to muddle young minds," it is an arrangement in which students rarely have the chance to determine the stakes in such conflicts because they experience the different positions, if at all, only in separation.

Kimball says that my proposal "purchases 'pluralistic' concord at the price of intellectual content." What I advocate has to do not with "pluralistic concord," but with dramatizing conflict. I don't de-emphasize "content," but argue that content will have to be based on conflict if it can't be based on consensus. As for my remark that "it hardly matters" what books students read, what I said was that it hardly matters when the students can't understand the books.

If Kimball has a better alternative than mine, I wish he would come out with it. All he offers here are the usual ritualistic fulminations against those who allegedly reject "the tradition and intellectual principles that have nourished and given meaning to their disciplines" in favor of "blatantly tendentious and ideological" thinking. Alas, it is just such blatantly tendentious and ideological characterizations of opponents which have driven many of those opponents to the conclusion that all characterizations are ideologically determined. It would be fairer to say that the critical schools Kimball denounces have raised

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important questions about the social functions of the traditions and principles informing the disciplines, questions which bear thinking seriously about even if you don't always agree with the critics' answers to them.

Gerald Graff
Northwestern University
Evanston, Illinois

To the Editors:

I was for the most part in agreement with the position Roger Kimball takes in "The Academy Debates the Canon," but I must disagree with him when he says of the six writers invited by *Salmagundi* to respond to William H. Bennett's NEH committee report *To Reclaim a Legacy* that none of them felt inclined to defend the report from Robert Scholes's attack. I defended the report, quite clearly, I think, albeit putting my defense in an historical context. I cannot imagine anything I have published in recent years giving anyone the impression that I was likely to side with Scholes on this issue, much as I respect his other critical work.

Those readers of the *Salmagundi* symposium for whom my position was not entirely clear may have less reason to blame me than the fact that there were two E. D. Hirsch's present: (1) the author of a well-known *American Scholar* essay to which Bennett, Scholes, and I referred, and (2) one of the respondents in the symposium. This latter Hirsch had, as Kimball points out, distanced himself from everything Bennett's report stood for. When I wrote my response the second Hirsch had not yet appeared on the scene. I still prefer his predecessor.

John P. Sisk
Gonzaga University
Spokane, WA

Roger Kimball replies:

"Dramatizing conflict." Content "based on conflict." Yes, it sounds wonderful: so chic, so existential, and so . . . *accommodating*. But what can it mean? Apart from the undeniable rhetorical value of allowing Professor Graff to be on all sides of any issue, does it really mean anything at all? Despite his protestations to the contrary, I am afraid that the chief thing to appreciate about Professor Graff's comments, here in his letter and in the symposium paper he read at Yale, is that they spring from a point of view that deliberately forfeits intellectual and moral substance for the sake of a vacuous pluralism. Except for proposing the formal requirement that everyone keep talking, Professor Graff has nothing to say about the truth or value of the ideas in question. Indeed, the very notion that the humanities have something to do with the pursuit of truth is rejected as a dangerously conservative prejudice.

One result of such pluralism—really, it is a kind of intellectual despair masquerading as pluralism—is that all positions come to be viewed as so many ideologies in an intellectual shell game whose only aim is self-propagation. It never seems to occur to Professor Graff that some intellectual positions might be truer or more worthy of transmission than others. Lecturing us about how important it is to keep the discussion going among ideological adversaries, he neglects to ask himself whether cultivating ideologies is the proper business of the university.

Professor Graff's letter admits that some things *are* blatantly tendentious and ideological, however—at least he uses those terms to describe my characterization of the Yale symposium on literary theory and the curriculum. Perhaps he would also allow that the symposium itself was a veritable inventory of tendentious and ideological positions. Yet he nonetheless clearly feels that to describe it as such—in other words, to say what really happened—is to commit the unforgivable sin of suggesting that there are more or less objective standards of evaluation.

I have no doubt that Professor Graff is sincere in his desire to help students through the morass of contemporary literary theory. But while he is busy arranging "teaching situations . . . to foreground philosophical and ideological differences" (one might have wished that this eager pedagogue had begun by using standard English), students are left with a welter of opposing views and no criteria to distinguish among them. I might also observe that my essay said nothing about protecting young minds "from exposure to philosophical and ideological conflicts." The

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point is that in the democracy of ideas and values that Professor Graff preaches the one thing he excludes is the one thing that might help equip students with the critical acumen to discriminate among competing views: an allegiance to the ideal of disinterested inquiry and scholarship. And to pretend, as is fashionable, that such an ideal is somehow as corrupted by *parti pris* as are the most radical feminist, deconstructionist, racial, or Marxist diatribes is a mark of profound intellectual and moral cynicism.

It is dispiriting to realize that the author of *Literature Against Itself,* which is admirably frank in its rejection of various modish literary ideologies, should have so thoroughly abandoned the principles that animated his earlier work. The sad truth is that the view that Professor Graff now espouses is not an answer to ideological conflict, as he promises, but a capitulation to it.

I am pleased to hear that Professor Sisk was for the most part in agreement with the position I took in my essay. And I am also pleased to learn that he was inclined to defend *To Reclaim a Legacy* after all. Did he do so "quite clearly"? Even on re-reading his response, I am afraid that I find it rather opaque. And on the two Hirsches: one might ask what the retractions and qualifications put forward by Hirsch number two tell us about the seriousness and good faith of his much admired predecessor.

Bernard Chaet

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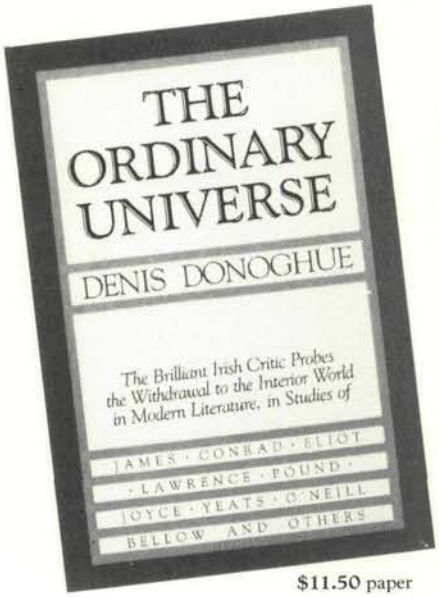
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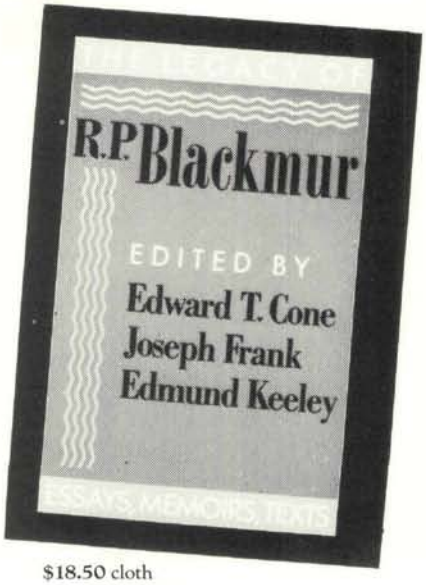

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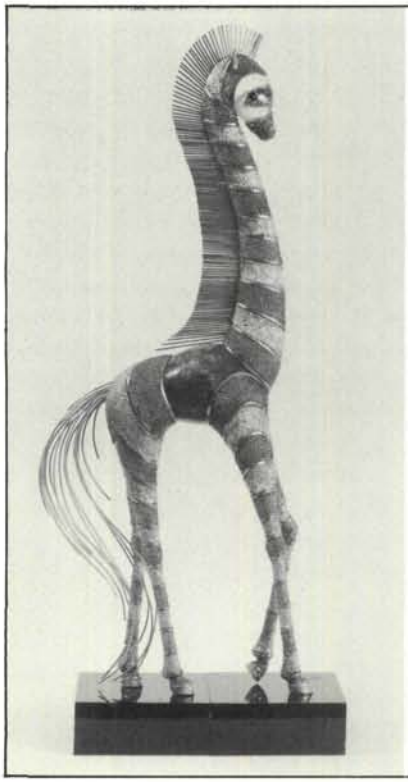

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Robert Longo, Untitled (*Men in the Cities* series, 1981), charcoal and graphite on paper, 8′ x 5′. Metro Pictures, N. Y. Photo: Pelka/Noble.

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